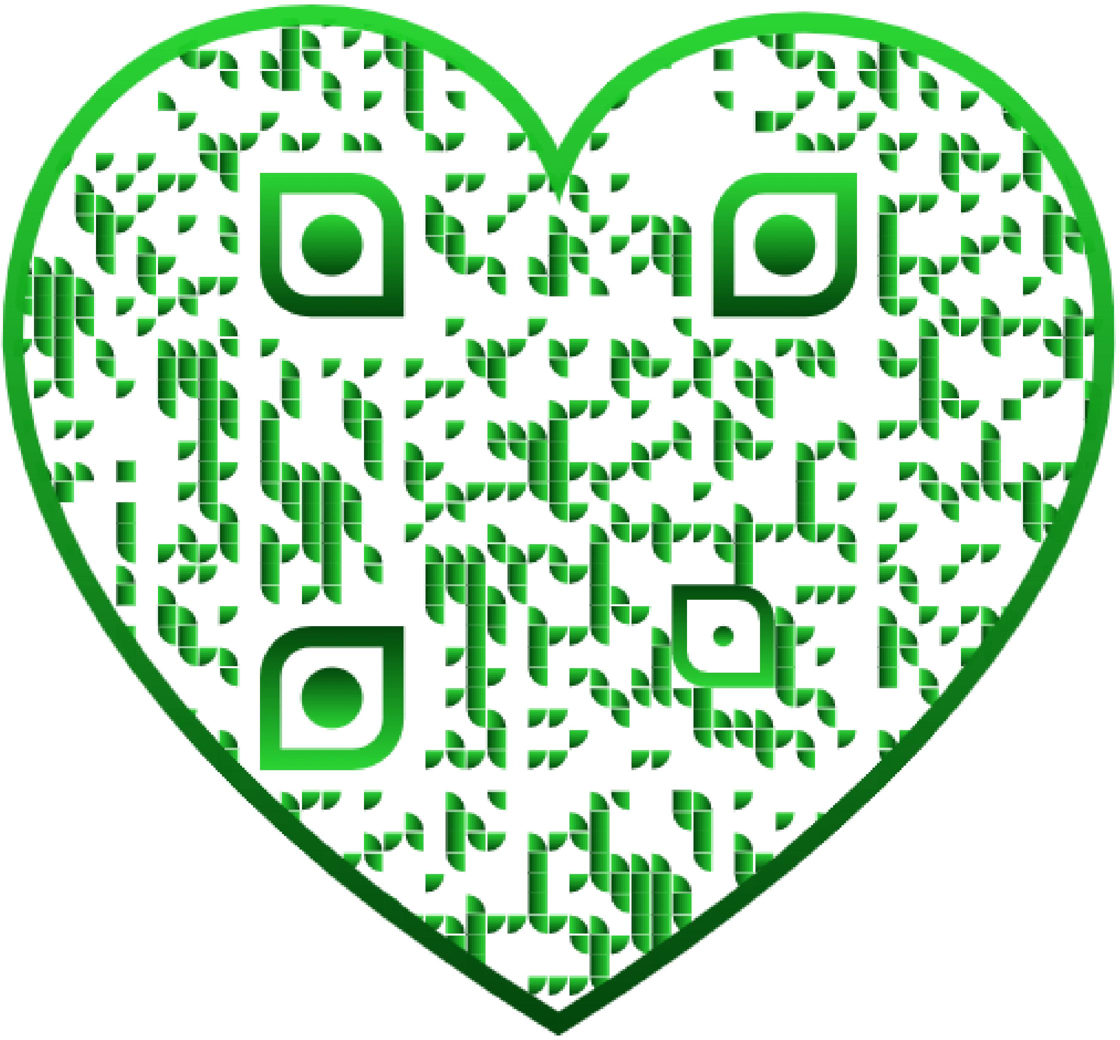
American Songwriter®

July | August 2016
Vol. 31, No. 5

THE MEMPHIS ISSUE



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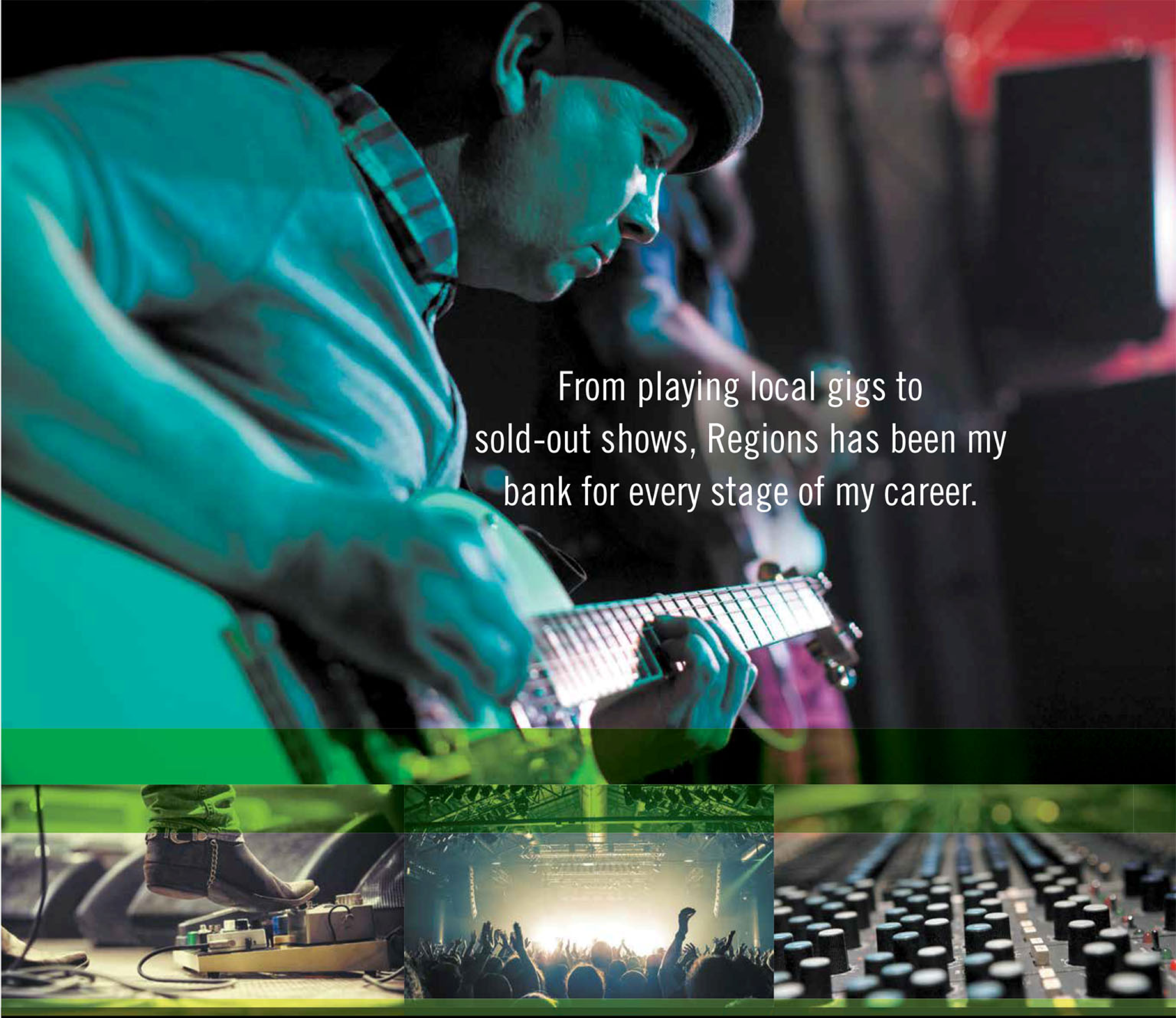

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Al Green

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COVER STORY

SUBLIMINAL SEDUCTION: THE STORY OF STAX SONGWRITING
How two Memphis soul men defined R&B in the 1960s and beyond.

FEATURES

VELVET DITCH BLUES: THE HISTORY OF GONER RECORDS
Indie label has carried the flag for Memphis punk.

AL GREEN'S SOUL JOURNEY
The story of a pilgrimage from the secular to the spiritual.

MEMPHIS IN PICTURES
A visual tour through some of Memphis' most interesting haunts.

A LEGACY LIVES ON AT STAX MUSIC ACADEMY
After-school program offers musical training for at-risk Memphis youth.

REVIEWS

NEW RELEASES
Diarrhea Planet, Ryan Adams, Robert Ellis, *Heartworn Highways* Soundtrack, Sarah Jarosz, Paul Simon, Felice Brothers, Mudcrutch

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PORTRAITS

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The Memphis Attitude

JULIEN BAKER
Same As She Ever Was

WILLIAM BELL
The Stax Soulman Comes Home

JAMES CARR
Dark Night Of The Soul

MEMPHIS MINNIE
A Portrait In Blue

SONGWRITER U

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Major Melancholy

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MAKIN' STUFF UP
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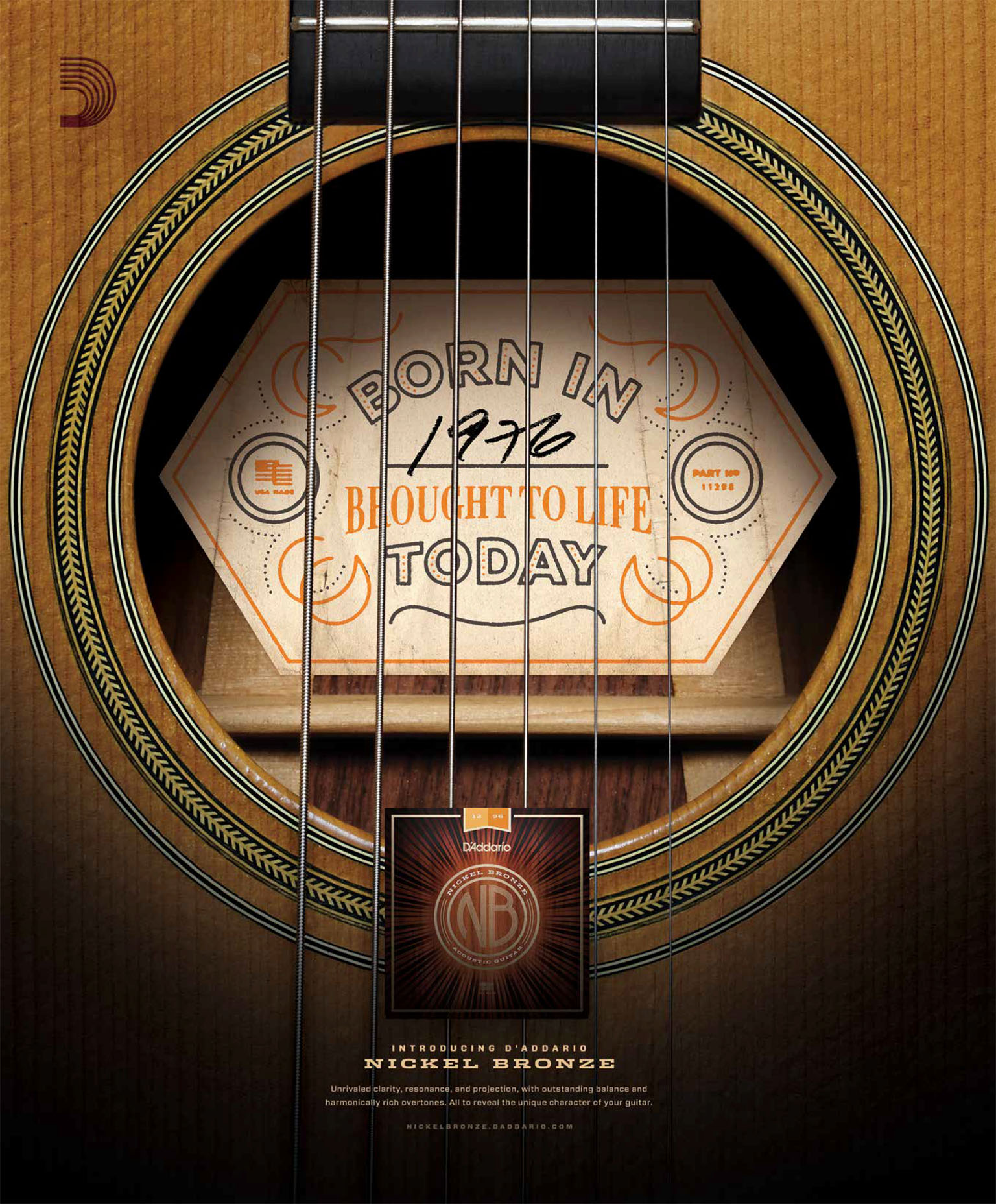
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THE MEMPHIS ISSUE

It is said that some art lovers who visit Florence, Italy experience Stendhal syndrome, a psychosomatic condition whereby one becomes so overwhelmed in the presence of famous art that they get physically ill. The phenomena is named after the French writer Stendhal, who, upon visiting Florence for the first time in the early 19th century, described being "in a sort of ecstasy … close to the great men whose tombs I had seen. Absorbed in the contemplation of sublime beauty … life was drained from me … and I walked with the fear of falling."

Perhaps more than a few visitors to Graceland and Sun Studios have felt this. And though we didn't exactly faint when walking by the Jungle Room and reflecting on the delights of a fried peanut butter and banana sandwich, it's hard not to be overtaken by Memphis, and all it has to offer music fans.

Simply put, we had a blast hanging out in the Bluff City while researching this issue. Our trip included a visit to Al Green's church, the Full Gospel Tabernacle, where we took in an inspiring session of largely improvised gospel (though Rev. Green was not in attendance that Sunday) before moving on to Presley's estate just down the road.

We got a private tour of Ardent Studios, the place where Alex Chilton's band Big Star cut all three of its records. We hit Goner Records and Shangri-La Records, two must-see places for any serious record collector. Later, a trip to Sun Records served as a good reminder of the genius of Sam Phillips and just how visionary (and crazy) this man was. As the writer Peter Guralnick told *American Songwriter* last year, "Sam envisioned [early rock and roll] long before it existed — before it had a name or expression." If Memphis only had Sun Records to claim, that alone would be enough.

Downtown nightspots like Earnestine & Hazel's, a former brothel that is purportedly haunted and offers live jazz and blues, did not disappoint. And neither did Raiford's, a raucous, family-owned late-night disco that first opened its doors nearly 40 years ago and is still going strong.

*****

Tennessee residents are lucky to have two world-class music cities within its borders. No other state can make such a boast. But Memphis is very much its own entity, musically speaking, and shares little cross-pollination with its more countrified cousin Nashville.

So much of Memphis's musical history draws from the blues tradition of the Mississippi Delta. And many a Memphis native will tell you that, culturally, the city is as much a part of Mississippi as it is Tennessee. But as Luther Dickinson, guitarist for the North Mississippi All-Stars and a solo artist in his own right, points out, what constitutes Memphis music is not bound by geographical lines. And it's not so much the Memphis sound (as that is a wide pretty wide cosmos unto itself) as it is "the Memphis attitude … it is underground, outsider music that transcends where it comes from."

The body of work put out by Stax records during its heyday in the '60s and '70s certainly transcends region. This issue's cover story looks at the Stax songwriting team of Isaac Hayes and David Porter, a serendipitous pairing that yielded such iconic soul classics as "Soul Man" and "Hold On, I'm Comin'," to name a few.

Hayes passed away in 2008 but Porter continues to work on behalf of Memphis' musical legacy. He now serves as the president of the Consortium MMT, a non-profit organization that is working to create and develop a sustainable music industry in the city. He has also been involved with the Stax Music Academy, an after-school music program that offers music education and mentoring for at-risk Memphis youth. Be sure to check out our story on the academy later in this issue.

We also explore Memphis's sometimes-ignored indie-rock scene, with a particular focus on the long-running underground punk extravaganza GonerFest and the music of its patron saint, the late Jay Reatard, whose madcap sound and persona functioned as a refreshing juxtaposition to the usual Memphis fare. And we talk to confessional folk songwriter Julien Baker, who at just 20 years old is making a name for herself with a debut album whose maturity belies her young age.

****

Later this summer *American Songwriter* will introduce a membership platform on americansongwriter.com. All of the print magazine content will appear in this section, and instructional content that appears under the Songwriter U banner will fall here as well.

All print subscribers will have access to the membership tier, and non-subscribers will need to enroll as members to access its content. Initially, there will be no charge to become a member. The membership section will continue to develop after its initial launch. Stay tuned to americansongwriter.com and our newsletter for updates. Thanks.

Caine O'Rear
Caine O'Rear
Editor-in-Chief

American Songwriter *would like to extend a special thank you to Tim Sampson of the Soulsville Charter Foundation for his generous hospitality and guidance in helping shape this issue.*

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MY WAY HOME

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Jonah Tolchin

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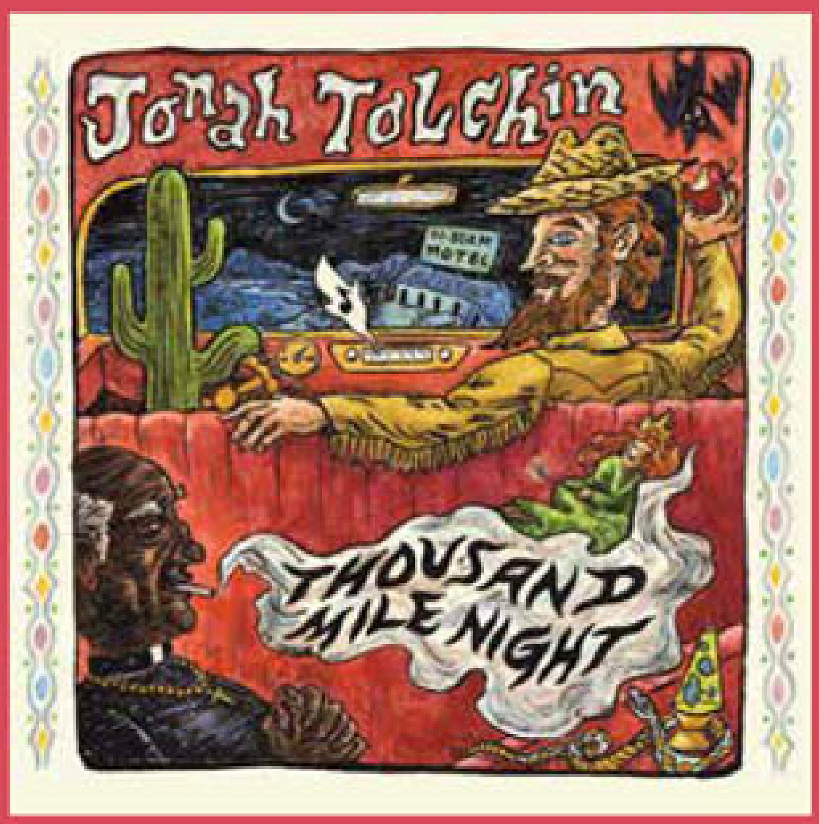
"...demonstrates the finesse and maturity of someone like Jason Isbell, 8 out of 10" - *Uncut*



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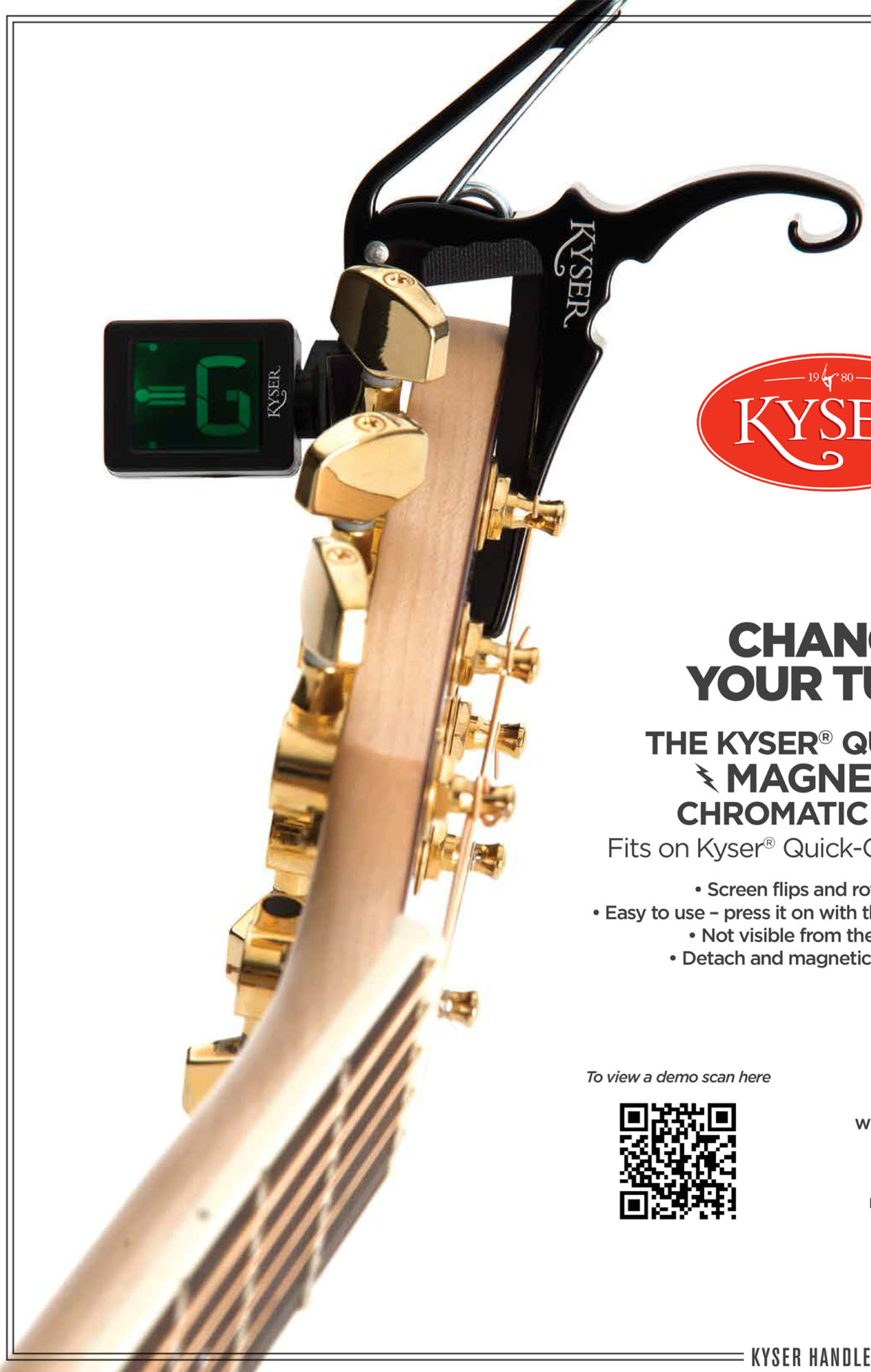

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AGAINST THE ODDS

It's great to watch a talent like Sturgill Simpson mature and expand his horizon [*Sturgill Simpson: Sea Changes*]. Sometimes you just want an underdog to make it. That's not a put down on Simpson. It's more a modern-day reality of long odds that Simpson has overcome. Being a fan for over three-plus years, I'm happy for Sturgill for no other reason than he is living his dream.

Jeff Holt

Andrew Leahey wrote an interesting piece on Simpson. I have to point out that his statement that "Radio stations still don't play his music" is inaccurate. Maybe if he had made the distinction between terrestrial radio (which most certainly does NOT play his music) and satellite radio, where he is a mainstay on Outlaw Country and even occasionally heard on The Loft, this reader would have been more accepting.

You don't sell 150,000 units by having a great live act. You've got to get some help from other sources, and Sirius/XM deserves credit for promulgating Simpson's unique songwriting and music.

Pete Jameson

GET OFF MY LAWN

Once again, Rand Bishop proves that he is the Perez Hilton of the songwriter community. If it wasn't pathetic enough for him to state in your September/October 2015 issue that the Americana music format was not successful due to The Civil Wars duo not getting along, he has made his words even more sad by inferring that Chris Stapleton is not that great of a songwriter [*Makin' Stuff Up: A Different Take*]. Claiming that Stapleton hasn't provided him with a "Both Sides Now" or "Fire And Rain" shows that Bishop is not really listening to Stapleton's full body of work, and more importantly, that Stapleton is playing on a totally different field than James Taylor and Joni Mitchell had in the 1970s.

MTV has changed everything. The music-listening public now thinks songwriting craftsmanship comes from a 26-year-old CoverGirl model who writes songs about her celebrity ex-boyfriends and uses stadium light shows and background dancers to get the message across. Maybe for some tweens this is songwriting, but for a middle-aged man like me who has had his share of ups and downs, a song like "Daddy Doesn't Pray Anymore" runs circles around anything Ms. Swift has produced. I thank God that Stapleton is out there to read my heart.

Matt Merta

He's not singing about pickups, dirt roads, solo cups or Daisy Dukes. That pretty much puts him miles ahead of everything else on country radio right now. At least the guy actually has original thoughts.

Jimmie Hughes

I appreciate the sentiment and think the discussion is worth having, but wow. The guy's got one record out and the author is nitpicking throwaway interview sentiments, saying his voice isn't as good as Tom Waits, and comparing his fire solo single to "Fire And Rain." Tall order.

Casey Reed

Enjoyed the album very much and recognize the talent. Still, it's great to see a music critic working this way.

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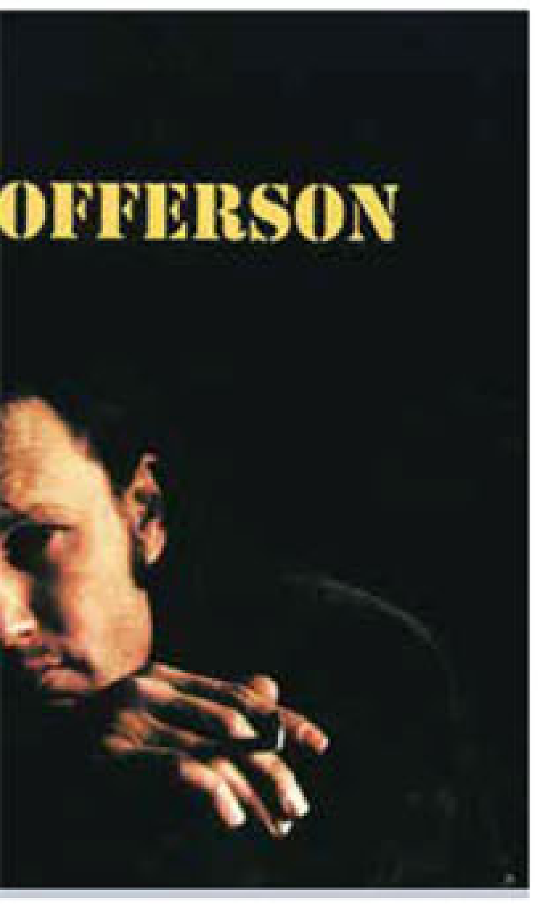
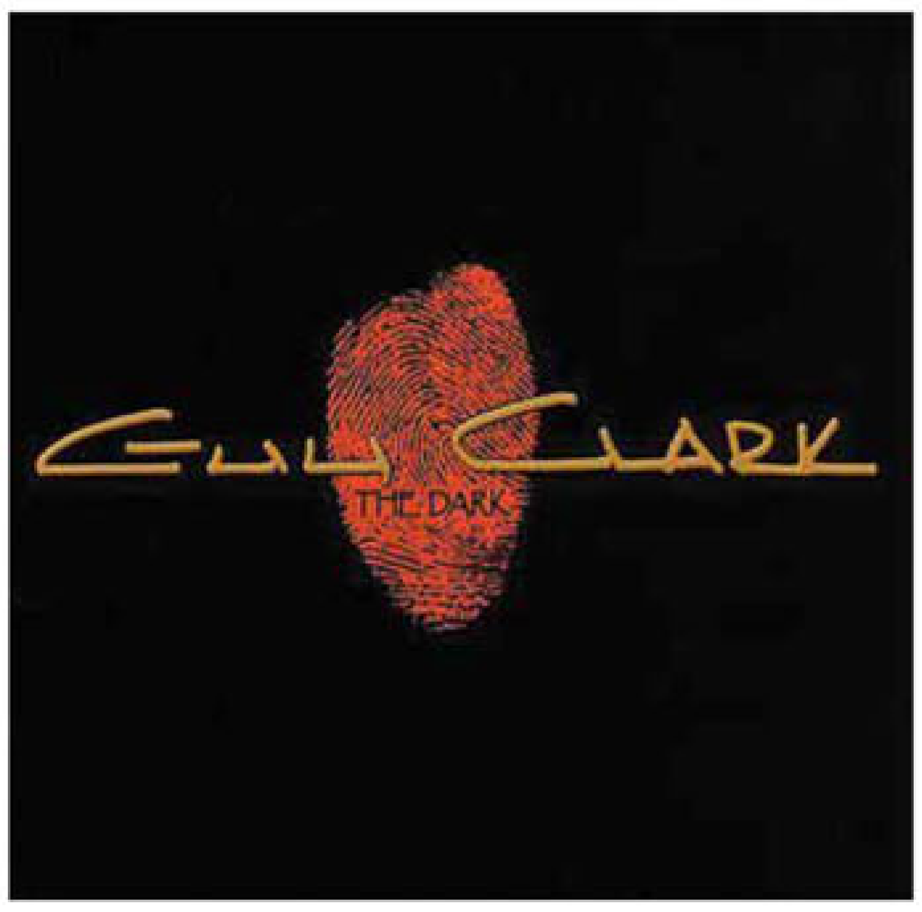
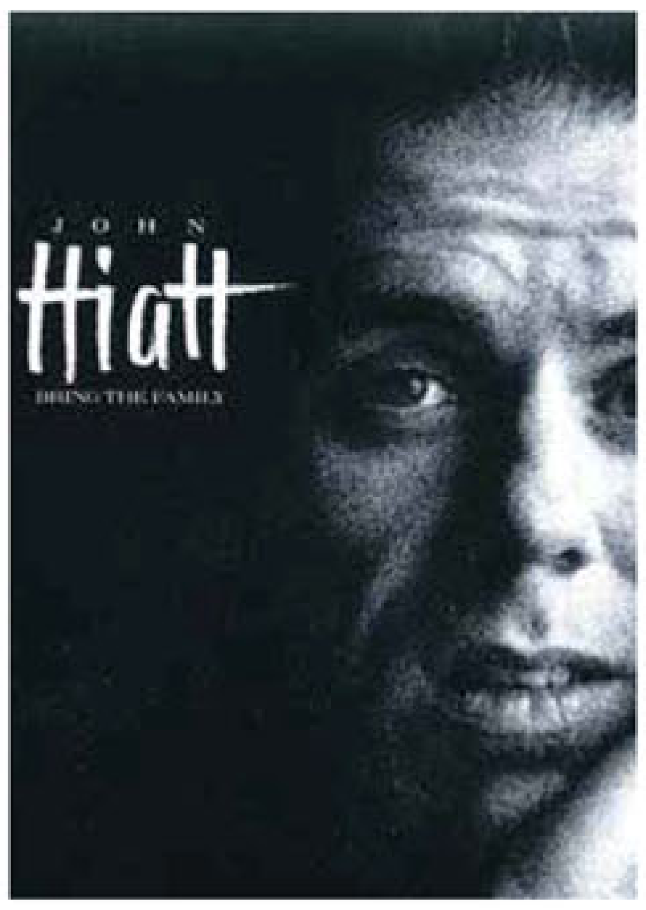
THE HIGH FIVE

"SONGS I WISH I'D WRITTEN"







WINNER!

NEAL PHILLIPS

"For The Good Times," Kris Kristofferson

"Angel Flying Too Close To The Ground," Willie Nelson

"Something," The Beatles

"Magnolia Wind," Guy Clark

"Tip Of My Tongue," John Hiatt

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"Joy In Repetition," Prince
"Honey And The Moon," Joseph Arthur

WILLIAM SPEARS

"I Don't Wanna Grow Up," Tom Waits
"Freakers Ball," Shel Silverstein
"The Cape," Guy Clark
"Poor Poor Pitiful Me," Warren Zevon
"I Spoke As A Child," Todd Snider

DENNIS CULLEN

"Make You Feel My Love," Bob Dylan
"Take It Easy," The Eagles
"Live Forever," Billy Joe Shaver
"In My Life," The Beatles
"Just The Motion," Richard Thompson

CHRIS BOUSQUET

"Time Of The Season," The Zombies
"You And Your Sister," Chris Bell
"Sunday Morning," The Velvet Underground
"You're The One, Lee," Miracle Legion
"Under The Milky Way," The Church

GRAHAM STOWE

"Your Belgian Things," The Mountain Goats
"Isis," Bob Dylan
"The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down," The Band
"Tomorrow Never Knows," The Beatles
"Brothers In Arms," Dire Straits

STEVE BUTLER

"Little Rock," Mark Stuart
"Girl From Arkansas," Rod Picott
"The Mysterious Fox Of Fox Hollow," Tom T. Hall
"The Kid," Buddy Mondlock
"Long Haul," Effron White

JASON LEE

"Stuff That Works," Guy Clark
"(Quicksilver Daydreams Of) Maria," Townes Van Zandt
"While My Guitar Gently Weeps," The Beatles
"Gentle On My Mind," John Hartford
"Life's Been Good," Joe Walsh

STU SIMS

"Murder In The City," The Avett Brothers
"The Suburbs," Arcade Fire
"Do You Realize??," The Flaming Lips
"Sunday Morning," The Velvet Underground
"Helplessness Blues," Fleet Foxes

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LUTHER DICKINSON

THE MEMPHIS ATTITUDE

BY LYNNE MARGOLIS

Never mind those little ol' map lines; Luther Dickinson is absolutely right when he says the true capital of Mississippi is Memphis, Tennessee.

That's where Luther, his brother Cody, and other rural North Mississippi Hill Country residents go when heading "into town"; where they depart from for air travel. That's where Beale Street birthed the Memphis blues, and where oral folk and blues traditions carried from the country to the city morphed into rock and roll.

The brothers' father, famed producer/composer Jim Dickinson, helped expand Memphis' musical reputation; they witnessed some of that evolution while growing up in Memphis and later, 30 minutes south in the Hill Country enclave of Coldwater, as Jim produced now-legendary recordings for Big Star, Alex Chilton, The Replacements, the True Believers and others at Ardent Recording Studios. (At 14, Luther recorded his first guitar solo on the Replacements' *Pleased To Meet Me*.)

There or at his Zebra Ranch, Jim also produced Mudhoney, John Hiatt, Jimbo Mathus, Amy LaVere, Lucero and many others, including his sons's band, the North Mississippi Allstars. (That was in addition to writing, arranging and/or playing with other artists recording in Memphis, Muscle Shoals and Miami, most famously Bob Dylan and the Rolling Stones. He also fronted the influential rock band Mud Boy & the Neutrons, and, with Ry Cooder, branched into film scoring.)

A historian and song-collector like his late father, Luther notes Memphis' magnetic pull drew musicians from the entire region, each seeking the heart of American roots music — and finding a place where they could thrive beyond the mainstream.

"It's a funny thing, the Memphis sound," Luther says. "You mean the jazz and orchestral jazz of Beale Street, or the street blues? Because blues was street music in the '40s and '50s; it was not tolerated in the nightclubs of Beale Street. It was jug-band music, or rock and roll. Or Stax, or soul.

"What is the Memphis sound? It's more like the Memphis attitude. … It is underground, outsider music that transcends where it comes from."

Lucero's Ben Nichols agrees. "Memphis music has always had … a kind of underdog quality to it," he says. North Mississippi blues and West Tennessee country may have converged there, but in Memphis, he adds, "We take all that and we make it our own. You don't exactly copy it; you take it and you put a little bit of that Memphis spirit and soul into it."

The distinction between Memphis and Hill Country blues, Luther says, is that the latter came from musical farming families, while '20s and '30s Delta bluesmen were solo-traveling itinerants. But he adds, "I do have to maintain that North Mississippi blues *is* Memphis music."

Explaining how his father facilitated that cross-pollination, Luther adds, "My dad and his friends weren't hippies. They were rock and rollers who turned into bohemians. And once the blues guys were rediscovered in North Mississippi, when the bohemians and blues guys got together, it was an amazing cultural explosion."

John Fahey, Bill Barth, Dick Waterman, the Lomaxes and other blues lovers who traveled south had different perspectives and the ability, Luther says, "to pluck these musicians out of obscurity and segregation … right out from under my dad and his friends. And once they all got together, they embraced each other."

The boys learned songs by Furry Lewis, Sleepy John Estes, Bukka White, Mississippi Fred McDowell and other folk-blues revival figures. They became fans of old-style blues.

But even though Zebra Ranch borders what recent Nashville transplant Luther calls "an enlightened little area" — a triangle from Memphis to Holly Springs and Oxford, Mississippi — he remained unaware of modern-day, electrified country blues until he discovered R.L. Burnside and Junior Kimbrough via Fat Possum Records. That led him to fife-and-drum bandleader Othar Turner, one of the last living links to that pre-Civil War sound.

"It blew my mind! And it blew my father's mind," Luther recalls. "He never in his wildest dreams thought that the experience he had in the mid-'60s would happen to his children 30 years later. It was a miracle. A Mississippi miracle."

Both sons have become respected producers and collaborators, continuing the spirit of renewed discovery with LaVere, Valerie June and Shardé Thomas, Turner's granddaughter.

Luther's recently released *Blues & Ballads (A Folksinger's Songbook: Volumes I & II)* is about preserving and building on his father's song-collecting legacy, with stripped-down, reconfigured versions of songs from previous solo, Sons of Mudboy or Allstars albums featuring guests including Mavis Staples, Alvin Youngblood Hart, JJ Grey, Jimbo Mathus and Jason Isbell.

Some of them also will appear on an upcoming Sun Records tribute album for which Luther will lead the band, joined by Cody, LaVere and John Paul Keith. The Allstars also will release a 20th-anniversary album of "hardcore Hill Country repertoire" next year.

"My dad and his friends are all dead and gone," Luther says, "and those songs will be lost if we and their other children don't carry them on." ★

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Photo by Jake Cunningham

JULIEN BAKER

SAME AS SHE EVER WAS

BRITTNEY McKENNA

If you ever have the pleasure of speaking with Julien Baker, you may be surprised by the startling dissonance between the voice behind her songs and her real world personality. Her bubbly, sometimes nervous speaking voice, which delivers thoughtful strings of ideas and revelations that seem well beyond her 20 years, and her occasional friendly "Yes, ma'am," don't quite match the sad, singular voice on her critically acclaimed debut album *Sprained Ankle*. It's moments like when Baker giggles after expounding on the songwriting process she's honed finely enough to produce heartbreaking songs like "Everybody Does" that you remember she's also a college student.

Born in Memphis to churchgoing parents, Baker grew up straddling the line between her Bible Belt upbringing and her desire to be a musician, which manifested itself early on in Memphis' lively hardcore and DIY punk scene. She grew up around bands and is part of Memphis rock band Forrister, with whom she still plays when she's able to head back home on weekends and breaks from her time studying literature at MTSU.

"It's a tightly woven thing," Baker says of the Memphis music scene. "But what's cool about it to me is that once you're in it, you're family. People go off and they tour and they come back and it always feels like, when I come back to shows it will be a super weird bill, but as long as you're there just because you enjoy music, there's a space for you. I've always appreciated that family aspect of Memphis."

She hadn't considered a solo career until she headed three and a half hours eastward to attend college. Her dorm, the walks on campus in between classes and some after-hours time spent in campus practice rooms served as the birthplaces for the songs that would eventually form *Sprained Ankle*.

"I would just hang out by myself and write for a very long time," she explains. "That seems kind of strange, but I didn't have many friends at all, especially the first semester of college. I moved there and knew zero people, so I would just hang out and knock on the door and get the custodian to let me into the music building where there were practice rooms."

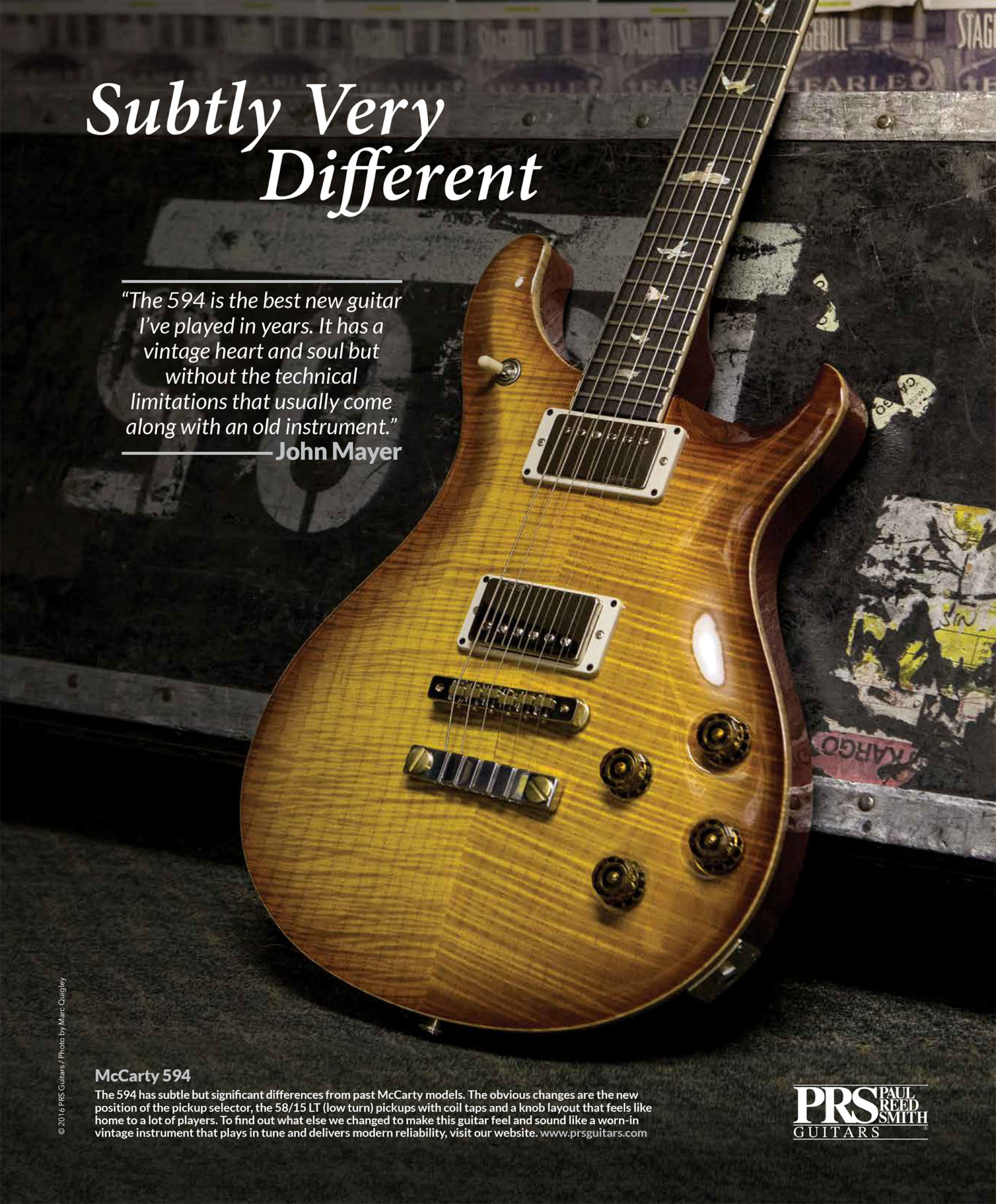
> **"It's a tightly woven thing."**
> **-Baker on the Memphis music scene**

That solitude becomes palpable over the course of *Sprained Ankle*'s nine songs, which tackle such heavy topics as sobriety, God, heartbreak and death. Despite her young age, Baker handles these heavy themes without ever sounding heavy-handed, giving the album a confessional feel without venturing into the voyeuristic.

"The record is autobiographical. Artists like Defeater, a post-hardcore band I love, or David Bazan, they'll invent fictional stories to get a point across or explore an idea," she says. "But it doesn't mean that happened to them or that they have personal stake in that feeling. And it can be cathartic while being artificial. But I've never been able to do that as well as I'd like. So all of the stuff that I discuss ends up being about my own life. On some level, I feel like that's self-indulgent because it's just me talking about me. So I try to make it a little bit broader, if I can. Or with the stuff I've been writing I just try not to think, 'Woe is me.' Because maybe *Sprained Ankle* fell a little in that camp, which I'm conscious of sometimes."

If Baker is anything, it's conscious. After recording the album at Richmond's Spacebomb Studios with a friend who happened to be interning there ("I think the misconception is that it's a Spacebomb record in the way that a Matt E. White record is a Spacebomb record," Baker adds. "But I only briefly met one of the other staff members."), she found herself listening back to the final recordings, wondering if those final tracks were truly finished. "I try not to listen back through *Sprained Ankle* because without a doubt I'm like, 'Ah, I could have done that take again,'" she says. "When in reality I couldn't have done that take again because the way we recorded it, it was on free intern time that we were using at Spacebomb. I think having those limitations in place made it easy to say, 'This is how the song has to be.' I know that's the Achille's heel of some artists. So I try not to let it be."

After finishing the album, Baker uploaded it to Bandcamp and posted a link on Facebook. Before she knew it, outlets like the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker* were singing her praises. That sudden fame hasn't changed Baker, though. She still rides the Greyhound home to play with Forrister. She still records song ideas on her phone and listens back on walks to class. And, though she has a laugh that can only be described as infectious, she'll still write music that moves the rest of us to tears. ★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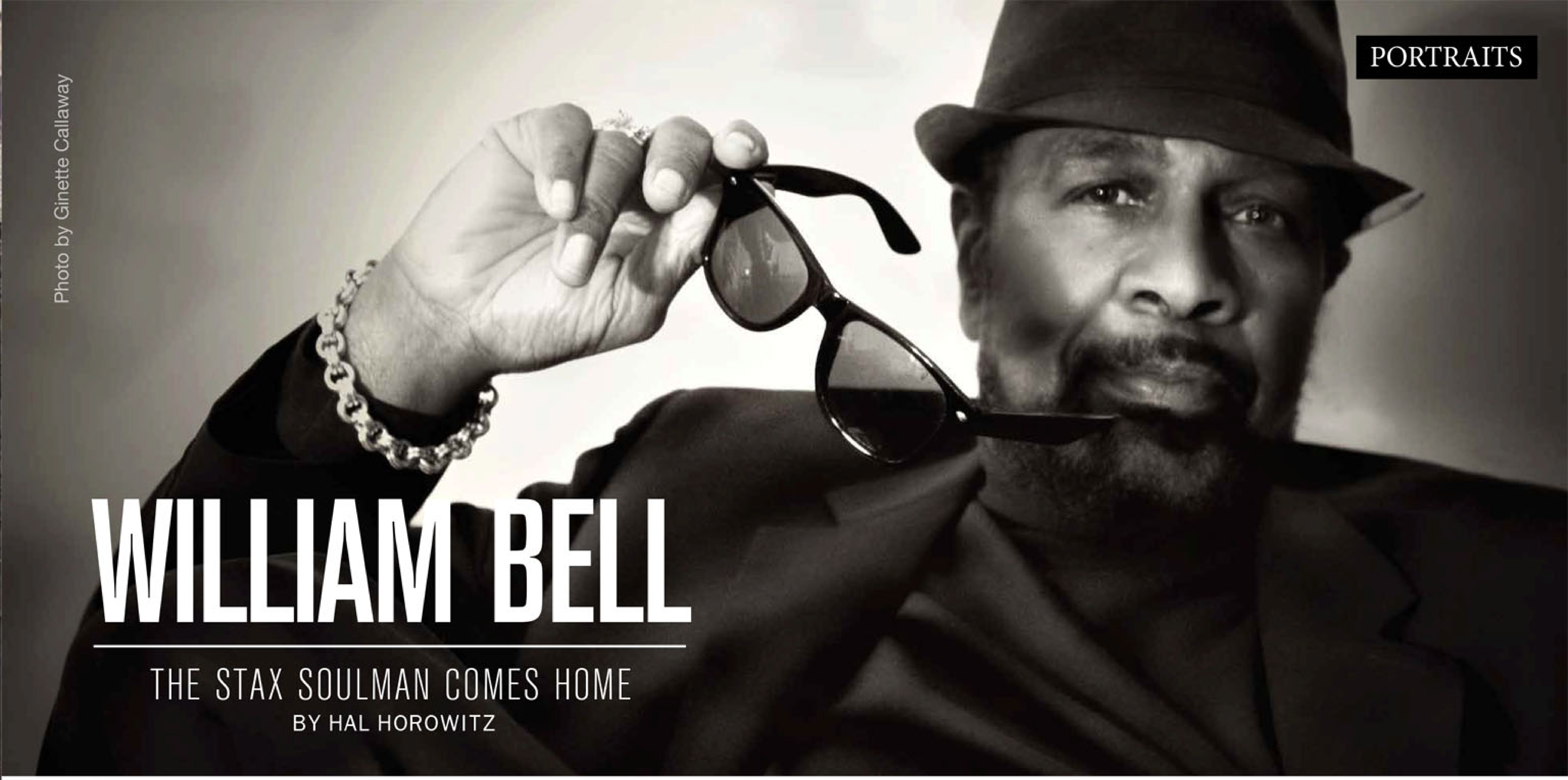

Photo by Ginette Callaway

WILLIAM BELL

THE STAX SOULMAN COMES HOME

BY HAL HOROWITZ

You may not think you know music from Stax soul legend singer-songwriter William Bell, but you're probably mistaken. If you've heard either Otis Redding's or The Byrds' recordings of his "You Don't Miss Your Water," or Linda Ronstadt sing "Everyone Loves A Winner," or for '80s rockers, Billy Idol's "To Be A Lover," you have been exposed to tunes Bell either wrote or co-composed. And who hasn't been in a bar when the band tears into the Bell/Booker T. staple "Born Under A Bad Sign" recorded by dozens of acts?

Less appreciated is that William Bell's own versions of those classics are as potent and timeless as the many covers. Since the original Stax label's demise in the mid-'70s, Bell has kept a lower profile yet stayed in the entertainment business by recording artists for his own imprints, releasing music and steadily touring.

But now, Bell is back in a big way. His terrific new album, *This Is Where I Live*, was recorded for the revived Stax and produced by roots veteran John Leventhal (Shawn Colvin, Rodney Crowell, Rosanne Cash). Leventhal also played most of the instruments and co-wrote the majority of songs with Bell and others, and the disc features predominantly new material, reminiscent of the golden age of Stax.

Bell is ready to hit the road with these recently recorded gems that not only do justice to his revered catalog, but are arguably as powerful as those older soul masterworks, most from almost a half-century ago. Anyone who thinks the 77-year-old Bell, born William Henry Yarborough in Memphis, Tennessee, can't be a viable singer this late in life needs to spin "The Three Of Me." The beautifully introspective ballad that opens his new release tells of "the man I was, the man I am and the man I want to be." It is especially poignant as he winds into the final chapter of life.

The album didn't develop quickly though. After the go-ahead from Stax, it was over a year in the making, as Bell recounts over the phone from his Atlanta base. "John and I wanted good melodic structure and lyrical content," he says. "We wanted it to be an extension of what I do yet move it forward into a modern sound with a broader appeal. It's world music now rather than regional."

"It's world music now rather than regional."

Despite the use of occasional overdubbed horns and strings, the texture is more uncluttered than Bell's earliest recordings. "We were looking for an earthiness and honesty to the music and the sound," Bell explains. "I'm glad we took our time and really constructed, dissected and put it under a microscope to make this the best project we could do."

In terms of song-crafting, Bell works best with other writers, such as Booker T., with whom he wrote "…Bad Sign," which he reprises in a different arrangement as incisive as the original, and many other hits from the '60s. Although he has written alone, Bell enjoys the collaborative process of his often deeply personal tunes. "I like bouncing ideas off another person," he says. "It makes the story stronger when you can sit and talk about it."

A heartbreakingly stripped-down, acoustic cover of Jesse Winchester's "All Your Stories," introduced to him by Leventhal and one of just two selections Bell didn't contribute to, is an album highlight. "John brought the song to me and I loved it because it's so reflective," he says. "At this stage of my career I'm reflective on the stuff that I write too. John played guitar and I sang, so we just left it like that."

The mid-tempo title track capsulizes Bell's 50-plus year career. It's a model of concise, tightly woven songwriting describing everything from an early appreciation of Sam Cooke, an artist whose smooth tones and bittersweet ballads still influence Bell, to his current love of home.

The home concept appears regularly, specifically in the gloomy "More Rooms," the crafty double meaning of "The House Always Wins" and the closing, sweetly sympathetic Curtis Mayfield-styled "People Want To Go Home." Bell explains, "I'm a homebody. After we wrote "This is Where I Live," we picked songs about the home front, whether good, bad or indifferent."

The majority of Bell's best compositions, beginning with 1961's "You Don't Miss Your Water" through many from the new album, refer to the darker side of relationships. That's no coincidence. It sells records and has kept the legendary artist relevant over the decades. "It has been my experience that people like sad songs," Bell elaborates, "but they like to have an optimistic approach at the end. They relate to that." ★

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JAMES CARR

DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL

BY PETER GERSTENZANG

So often in soul music, there is sadness, suffering, desperation. And then there is James Carr. He seems so far beyond these emotions, that, by comparison, other vocalists sound like petulant children when they weep, wail or moan. James Carr is the voice of terrifying resignation, paradoxically presenting his plummy tone, careful phrasing and extraordinary pitch while he sings, seemingly, from hell. It's not so much the location that is so frightening. It's the fact that he sounds so unsurprised about being there. Sure, there's real dread in his pained baritone, but Carr's voice carries an eerie undersong. Yep, this is where I figured I'd end up, he seems to be saying, with an unnerving acceptance.

Born to a Baptist preacher's family in Coahoma, Mississippi in 1942, Carr began by singing in various gospel groups as a young man, while holding down a day job. But he faced even worse problems than most African-American artists of his day. James Carr also suffered from bipolar disorder which derailed his life and career on numerous occasions. This condition sadly served to reassure him that no matter how happy he might feel on certain days, hellish times were never too far away.

This is a man who finds little surprise at life's cruel fates.

His first real hit was the appropriately titled "You've Got My Mind Messed Up." Interestingly enough, it's not terribly convincing. It's a workmanlike knockoff of a song that should've been given to someone else. In fact, considering the resemblance, that someone should've been Otis Redding. It's a cool enough ballad, with the appropriate horn charts and authentic feel of R&B. Still, it's clear, that despite the ominous title, Carr had not yet found his voice. He's really doing his very best Otis — the begging, the pleading those famous nah nah nahs.

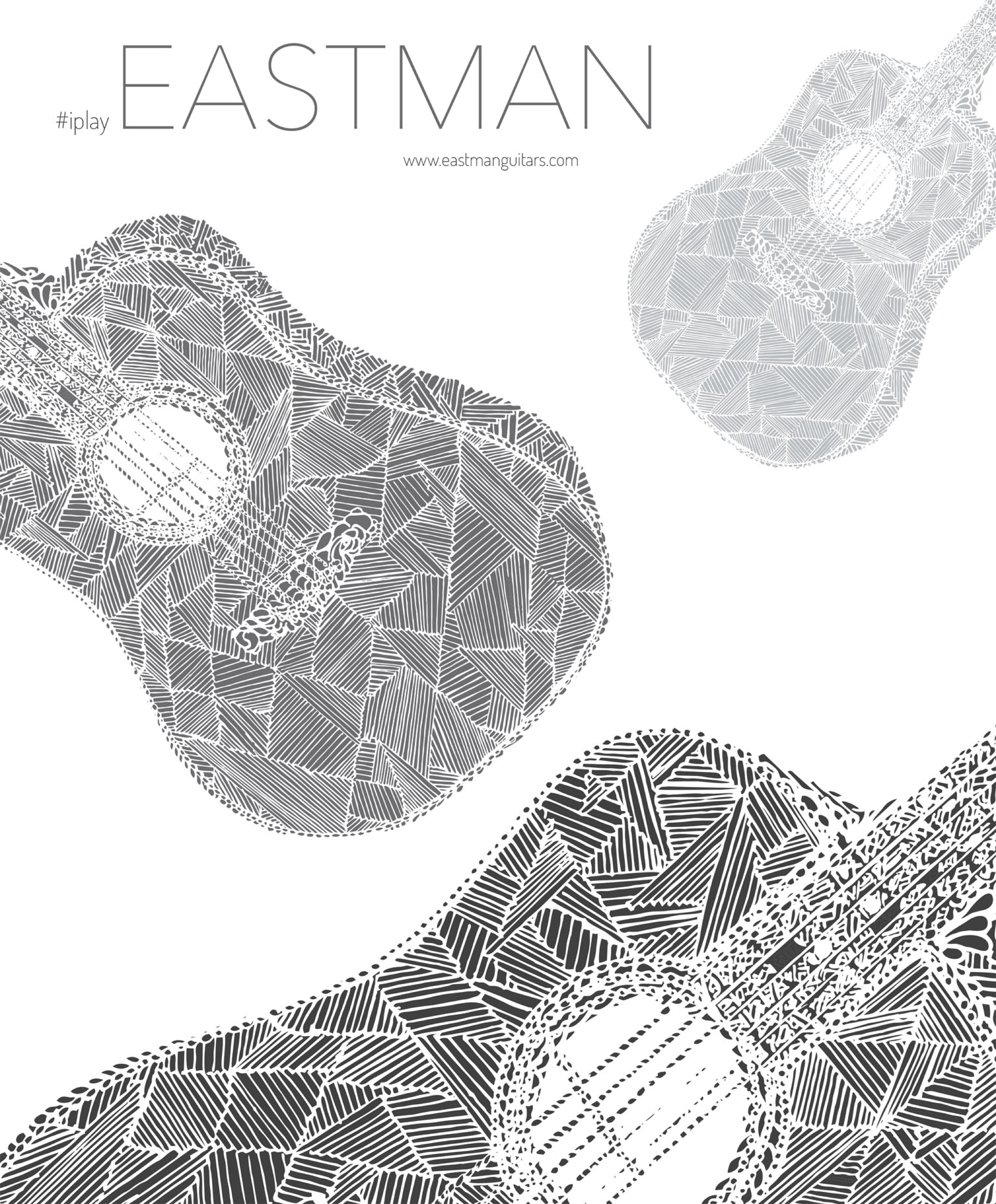
Carr sounds lively enough – his voice is an instrument to marvel at – but the overall vibe is wrong. This James Carr still *believes*, in love, in life, in charming his way through it all. He would soon break through to his truer, darker self, and then the Otis in him would be gone, leaving him with nothing. But, as Paul Newman once claimed, "Sometimes nothing can be a real cool hand."

His next hit was where Carr put his stamp on soul music forever – where he realized that even with all the good luck that lingers in this world, none of it was ever going to befall a guy like him. I'm talking, of course, about Carr's most famous song, "The Dark End Of The Street." This is where you go to get not just the gist of the man's singing genius, but his almost unbearable fatalism. This exquisite soul standard, about a secret, tortured love affair, has always had a quietly hair-raising quality to it, whether sung by Linda Ronstadt or Aretha Franklin. But Carr's rendition is at once the loveliest and the most disturbing. When he gets to the line, "They're gonna find us," his hopeless acceptance is more chilling than a thousand anxious exclamations or vocal tricks. This is a man who finds little surprise at life's cruel fates. He sounds as if he knows them all by heart. And he is certain, as with everything else that has happened to him, that this romance is going to end very badly.

Along the way there were ghastly incidents. Like the time Carr, singing in Japan, apparently overdosed on antidepressants and froze in front of the audience, though, soul man that he was, he rallied and finished his tour there to great success. He was nearly forgotten until 1986, when writer Peter Guralnick published his book *Sweet Soul Music*, which renewed interest in Carr and he began to record again, though without chart success.

Though his life was short (he died from lung cancer at age 57), Carr still managed to make an indelible mark on music. And one can only imagine that when he knew he was dying, he probably accepted it with the same sense of quiet horror he put into his songs. In fact, there's another notable song of Carr's that seems to perfectly sum up his coal-dark life. The tune is "Pouring Water On A Drowning Man." He sings the song as if he's quite aware that one horror will always be followed by another. Still, there's a sense at bottom of gritty perseverance here, too. James Carr, for all his fatalism, never lost his oddly-powerful resilience. In other words, when you're drowning and they're pouring water on you, all you can do is keep on swimming. ★

Illustration by Courtney Spencer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MEMPHIS MINNIE

A PORTRAIT IN BLUE

BY PETER GERSTENZANG

Illustration by Courtney Spencer

It's not as if she's been forgotten, exactly; when you have a neon sign of a name like Memphis Minnie, you still sort of flash in people's minds. But not everyone remembers *why* the singer with the cartoonish moniker was so well-known. Memphis Minnie is considered by many to be the one of the finest country blues singers and guitar players of her time. She influenced everyone from Big Mama Thornton to Bob Dylan to those gifted, pilfering punks, Plant and Page. Let's clean the cobwebs off the myth and bring Memphis Minnie back to human scale. We know she was virtually unprecedented. Why was she so freakin' great?

Born Lizzie Douglas on June 3, 1897, in Algiers, Louisiana, Minnie was the eldest of 13 kids. She grew up near Memphis and began playing the guitar at 10. She *hated* her name and insisted she be called *Kid* by her family. Her desire to be her own person and her rebellious ways were evident early on; she ran away from home at 13 to sing and play guitar on Beale Street, that fertile soil where baby blues artists, already sprouting roots, were replanted. And with emotional and financial factors replacing the sun, the cold, the rain, they grew into towering trees of music. That is the spare outline of her life.

But really, one good listen to Minnie's signature song, "Me And My Chauffeur Blues," will tell you more about her influence, complex appeal and pure talent than any timeline. Take Minnie's guitar playing, that quietly insistent strum that, while playing blues changes, is also redolent of swing and Appalachian music, while simultaneously seeming to anticipate the chicka-boom bounce of rockabilly years before Scotty Moore. Minnie's voice is equally complex. The tone is honeyed and lovely to listen to but also betrays a barely suppressed anger, a world of worry and hurt. Her voice is a cry, a cackle, a threat.

Bill Broonzy said she was as good as any blues performer he ever saw.

Lyrically, her tune has nothing to do with car and driver. Minnie is talking about a cheating lover whose infidelity has brought her to her wit's end. Her jealousy over his divided attention is enough to drive her to contemplate murder, though she can't decide whether she should kill her man or try to win him over once and for all by buying him a brand new car. It's not the only time Minnie broached the idea of answering adultery with homicide. In "I'm Talking About You No. 2," she addresses the perpetrator directly: "You's a married man and you got a wife/ You keep running around here, you'll lose your life".

No less than Bob Dylan dug the former tune. Just listen to his "Obviously Five Believers" right after "Chauffeur." It's the same damn melody. Plus, guitarist Robbie Robertson mimics the song's riff, originally played by second guitarist Little Son Joe. The tune was later done well by an early incarnation of The Jefferson Airplane, too. The word is Memphis Minnie didn't make a dime on the deal.

There are other details that help to flesh her out, of course. When she first ran away, she also traveled with the Ringling Brothers Circus. She experimented with the electric guitar, carried a gun, had a mean chewing tobacco habit and, like many female performers of her time, engaged in prostitution to make ends meet. Listen to "I'm Selling My Pork Chops (But I'm Giving My Gravy Away)": This is classic blues right here. I'm doing what I have to do to survive. I'm paying the rent — on my terms. Minnie frequently spoke of the world's oldest profession in her music, though never directly. She also performed the salacious "If You See My Rooster," years before Howlin' Wolf or The Stones. The fact that most people don't know this fact speaks for itself.

There's more. Big Bill Broonzy said she was as good as any blues performer he ever saw. She co-wrote "When The Levee Breaks," which, with some changes, was recorded years later by Led Zeppelin. She cut hundreds of sides, all of which are worth listening to. She had a stroke in 1960, which ended her career.

You need only to go back to the records to understand the essence of this trailblazing artist. Her fierce independence, confidence, wits and attitude embolden each of her songs. As long as hard times, money troubles, faithless men, racism, the need to cry, to shout, to have sex exist, she'll be essential. Which is another way of saying we'll be listening to Memphis Minnie for a long time to come. ★

Jay Reatard performing with the band Angry Angles, circa 2005. Photo by Mark Murmann.

VELVET DITCH BLUES

Goner Records And The History of Memphis Punk

BY EILEEN TOWNSEND

THE BACKROOMS

To understand how Goner Records made an international name for southern-tinged garage rock, you have to understand a couple things about Memphis. Memphis is a river town. We are implicated in the usual cliche about river towns: Things move through here easily, but it can feel like nothing ever really changes. It is a city where people live in drafty bungalows with overgrown backyards, where you can still smoke in bars, and where white and black are as impressed into the streets and the schools as they were a half-century ago. I once heard someone describe Memphis as a "velvet ditch" — a mud pit lined with the cheap glamour of an earlier era.

Like Philadelphia or Detroit or St. Louis or any of America's other left-behind places, Memphis may not have much in the way of opportunity, but it's always been a good town for grassroots music. There's space and time and decently cheap rent. And there's a lot to get angry about around here. Thus, Goner Records: the uglified, fuzzed out, dumb-as-a-means-of-survival scene that has sheltered punk legends like Jay Reatard, Ty Segall, and Guitar Wolf. Goner Records is a storefront shop, a label, and, once a year, a punk festival that draws beer-fueled discontents from around the world. Goner is local even when it's not. If the bands don't come from the overlooked backrooms of Memphis, they come from the backrooms of somewhere.

To say that Goner is "artist-run" in the age of Tidal might be misleading, so, for clarity: The guy who started Goner out of his closet, Eric Friedl (punk appellation: Eric Oblivian), still mans the counter of the record store. His band with Greg Cartwright and Jack Yarber, The Oblivians, is the kind of band you call stupid as a compliment. They've been together since the early 1990s, when Goner also got its start. The two happened at once: without Oblivians, there's no Goner; without Goner, there's basically no garage rock revival. Eric has floppy brown hair and an open face, which work together to make him look improbably boyish. He grew up in Hawaii but found Memphis in his twenties, and has been here ever since.

Friedl co-owns the label with his friend and fellow musician Zac Ives. The two met when Ives was in college and Friedl was playing grimy sets in a downtown alley bar called Barrister's. Of the two, Ives seems like the one more likely to wear a collared shirt, but both men are far from buttoned-up, nor do they seem like they are ever going to professionalize. The handshake deals and off-the-cuff friendship network that defined the label in the early '90s still do today. Goner doesn't sign contracts, and to be a long-term Goner-associated act doesn't necessarily mean that they put out your music. It just means that you crossed through their doorway at some point. When asked how they choose their artists, both Ives and Friedl look a little incredulous. They both answer that they pick people they're friends with whose music they like, as if that was the only possible way to do it.

FREAK SHOW

Over the last two decades of releasing music, Goner has not so much grown as they have doubled down. Ives came on board in 2003 and they opened the store around the same time in a storefront in the Cooper Young area of Midtown. The shop is plastered with band stickers and posters and lined, wall-to-wall, with the musical contents of Friedl and Ives' collective brains. It is one of those rare places where browsing feels like an education, and where it's easy to find the unexpected. It's also a good spot to hear a few dive bar war stories. Midtown Memphis has a small constellation of cancerous dives, the debatable health of which is at least partially owed to Goner shows.

The show stories are apocryphal. People party and fight. Most people around Midtown have heard about Jay Reatard pissing on his band and on the audience in the middle of his last Gonerfest, in 2009. That was months before the punk prodigy's death by an overdose in January of 2010. Years before, Reatard, who was born Jay Lindsey and left a difficult home life at 15, gained notoriety for a YouTube video of his fighting a fan. To quote Chris McCoy, director of *Antenna*, a documentary about Memphis' punk history: "Imagine what that does to a person. Your passion is the music, but you're rewarded for putting on a freak show every night." Reatard had the reputation for pushing performances to the edge and sometimes jumping off.

But the walls can come down for good, too: The Barbaras' 2008 set at Gonerfest was legendary bacchanal, as were Harlan T. Bobo's holiday shows, which looked like they were art directed by a crew of Valhalla-bound archangels. Quintron and Mrs. Pussycat use puppets and a synth organ in their set. Nobunny performs nude with — what else? — a bunny mask. There was the one Gonerfest when a local dive owner promised to bring a dunk tank but

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instead brought a kiddie pool full of live eels. Or the time that Natalie Hoffman, now of NOTS but formerly the bassist of Ex-Cult, got hit in the face with a full tallboy, thrown by an anonymous audience member. It hit her forehead but she didn't miss a note. After the song finished, she turned to her band as if to say, "Did anybody fucking see that?" No one had.

As much as Goner has excited the local music scene, it has done an equal amount for the appreciation of garage rock around the world. Goner's first release was the Japanese band Guitar Wolf's *Wolf Rock!*. The album is loud and rough, retro but with a difference. (The difference being that some combination of the Vietnam War and Reaganomics and Hello Kitty had happened, and nothing made any sense anymore, culturally speaking.) On the album's Wikipedia page under "Recorded" it says, simply, "Seiji's basement."

When *Wolf Rock!* came out in 1993, the mid-century-influenced sound of garage rock was not big. The '80s had a few garage revivalists, but by the early 90's garage rock had been largely subbed out in the cool kid haunts for grunge. Later, they competed with nü-metal. "Everyone thought they were incompetent," says Friedl about Guitar Wolf. Everyone except Friedl, who found merit in the all-pistons-firing, buried-under-a-collapsed-building-and-trying-to-get-out-via-guitar-riffs vibe of songs like Guitar Wolf's "Apache Leather" and "Shooting Star Noise." The record release, untypical in most ways, nonetheless typified the melting pot quality of Memphis' musical history. Per McCoy: "A kid from Hawaii started a label in Memphis so he could put out a record by a band from Tokyo who sounded like a Memphis band."

FUCK ELVIS

It's hard to overstate how rough and wrong Goner's early years could be. When the Oblivians started out, they were inflammatory to be inflammatory in a way that is easier to pull off if you're a white guy and the Internet doesn't exist yet. Some of the lyrics about women make you wonder if any women got within a square mile of the scene. (Women did and do, and the scene is better for it: Alija Trout of the Lost Sounds is one of the most talented musicians under that roof, while the four women who comprise NOTS tear it up.) They wanted to buy controversy — something they never quite succeeded in doing, for the best. Friedl quipped in an early interview with a sympathetic blogger that Marilyn Manson had the money to buy outrage; they never did.

You couldn't be blamed, as a listener, for not separating the purposeful idiocy of the words from the merit of the music, but you'd at least have to acknowledge that the point was to be meritless. 1990s Memphis garage rock is straight-up nihilism. The lyrics sucked, the instruments sucked, and the shows were the weird catharsis of all that sucking.

Since the 1990s, Goner has expanded the category while staying true to form. The Oblivians went on to release maybe the only gospel-punk record in the world, *Oblivians Play 9 Songs With Mister Quintron*. When asked about what releases he sees as essential, Friedl has a shortlist: Harlan T. Bobo's *Too Much Love* ("moody brilliance too good not to release"); Carbona's self-titled punk album (which has such forward motion that its hard to believe it wasn't recorded in a moving vehicle); Ty Segall's *Melted* (sad, garage-y fuzz); Eddy Current Suppression Ring's *Primary Colours* ("Gonerfest has showcased so many bands from Down Under that Aussies come to Memphis to see what's going on in Australia"); Nobunny's *First Blood* ("poppier and more jovial"); Ex-Cult's hardcore-influenced and post-punk self-titled release; and NOTS's weirdo synth-punk on *We Are NOTS*.

1990s Memphis garage rock is straight-up nihilism.

And of course there's Jay Reatard's teenage album with the Reatards, aptly called *Teenage Hate*. It was re-released by Goner in 2011 alongside another early Reatards recording: *Fuck Elvis, Here's The Reatards*. Of all the album titles in all the dive bars in all the city, "Fuck Elvis" pretty much nails it. Elvis is the local patron saint of sorts, king of the blue-lit '70s that the city can't seem to shake — so if your goal is to shit on something, Elvis is a good place to start. At points on the album you can hear Jay singing, "I don't give a shit about anything" with an almost Elvis-y lilt, before drowning it in fuzz and noise and shouting. Likewise, when he screams "I've got the Memphis Blues" in the song "Memphis Blues," it's both a celebration and contortion of the city's blues-related statuary, of the Vegas afterlives and gift-shop-ification of our music history. This is Joni Mitchell decrying the death of Beale Street, only unwashed and wielding a piece of broken glass.

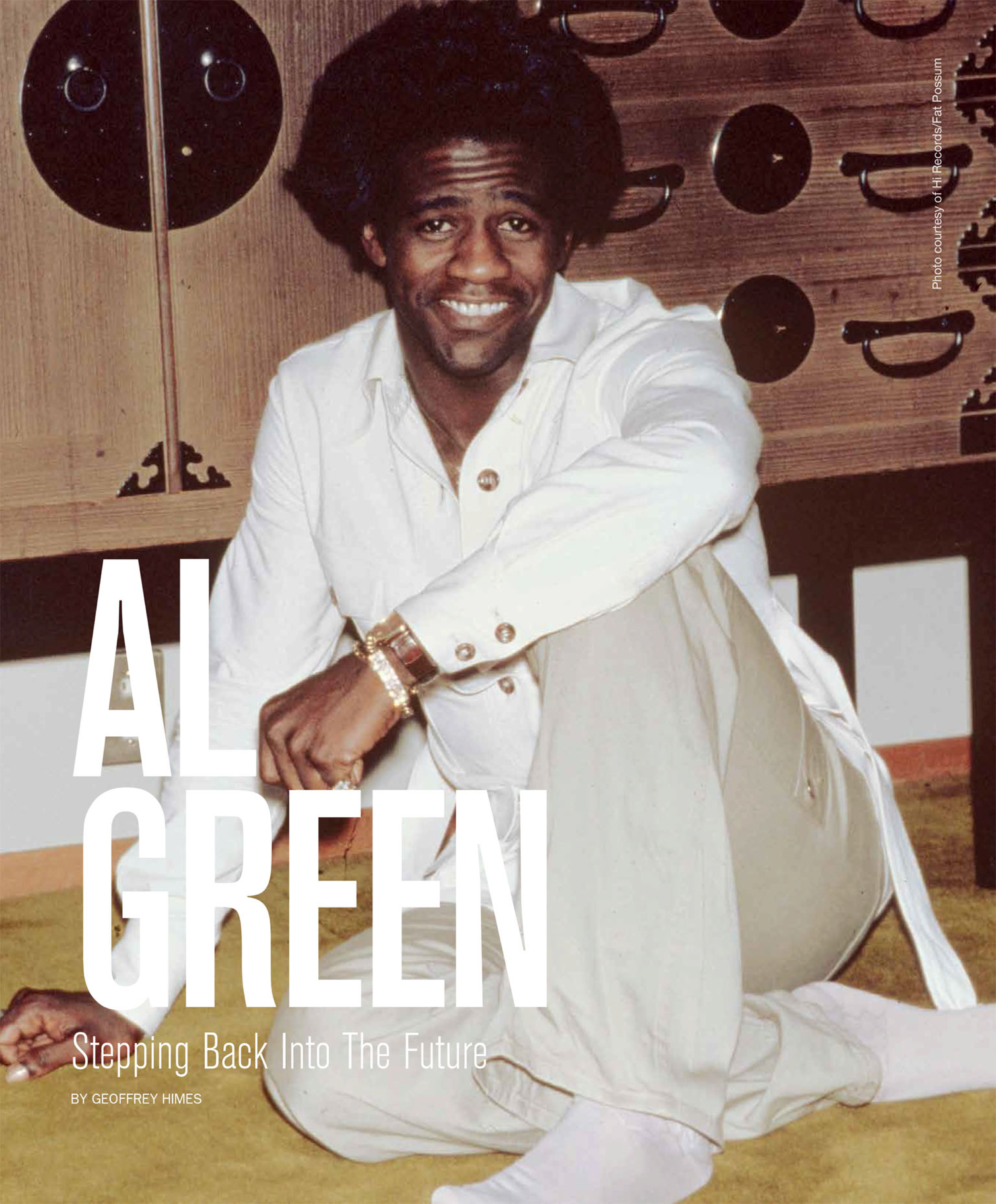
POUR GAS ON YOUR CAR

Despite the fact that the label casts a fairly wide net, Goner-released music is identifiable for its repetitiveness and its fuzzy insistence, but most of all, for its drive. These albums are joyrides downhill on a curvy road, where the car doors have flung open. You've got no choice but to hang on. Even the songs that run longer than the standard 1:30 feel this way. Quintron's "Waterfall" on *Too Thirsty 4 Love* runs 4:09 but doesn't ever take its time: "No more excuses," Quintron proclaims in the song, "pour gas on your car."

Technically speaking, the music is a bit like a broken car, too. The Goner canon is built on the working theory that you can make a surprising amount of sounds happen by misusing the cheapest equipment out there. JB Horrell, a wolfish-looking longtime rocker who plays guitar in Ex-Cult and in Aquarian Blood, told me that he plays a solid-state amp you can find in any pawn shop and uses one pedal. The pedal costs $14.99 on Amazon and, according to Horrell, is as good as anything you can find out there.

This back-to-basics mindset might have less to do with a commitment to authenticity than it does practicality, because stuff gets broken. Stuff gets broken a lot. But the scene's complicated relationship with authenticity has to do with it, as well. In a time when the lifeblood of small city arts are development deals (think: Arts Districts) or social-media-fueled-marketing schemes, Goner has the rare distinction of being owned by the artists who make it happen. A friend asked me what I thought about Goner a few months ago, and the first thing that came to mind was, "It's not trying to be the thing. It's the thing itself."

Whatever your feelings about the crudeness and backwater cheer of the music, there's at least this: they aren't faking it. Southerners have a weakness for people who aren't faking it. We'll trust a wrongheaded confessor, some teenage kid keeling over and screaming "fuck the world" before we will someone who tells us it's all gonna be all right. At its worst, Goner is pointless boys club narcissism, and in bad taste. At its best, Goner's music is that punk confessional: they're throwing lit matches and aerosol cans under the bus and they've got exactly 30 seconds to tell you what they truly, truly think — which is that they could care less. ★



AL GREEN

Stepping Back Into The Future

BY GEOFFREY HIMES

Photo courtesy of Hi Records/Fat Possum

DURING 1989'S NEW ORLEANS JAZZFEST, Al Green took the stage at the Saenger Theatre in a resplendent outfit — white jacket, white shirt, white pants, white shoes and lots of white teeth — and with a restless energy that had him rocking on the balls of his feet. As the band vamped, he handed out red roses to women in the first row (including a wide-eyed Bonnie Raitt) as if he were both a paternal preacher and a flirty Casanova.

"A lot of people think we shouldn't do the old songs," announced the Memphis singer who had abandoned a fabulously successful pop-music career to devote himself to gospel. "But what's wrong with singing about 'L-O-V-E' and 'Let's Stay Together'? What is God if he isn't L-O-V-E'?"

It wasn't clear who he was talking to. Was it to the hard-core Christians in the audience — those starchily dressed African-American men and women proud that the church had snatched one of the century's greatest singers back from the secular realm but still skeptical about his conversion? Was he talking to the T-shirted music lovers who wished he'd do his old hits — not because those numbers were non-religious but because they were better songs?

The more he talked, the more it seemed he was talking mostly to himself. He was trying to convince himself that it was okay to mix the sacred and the sensual, the love of God with the love of the flesh. It was as if he were trying to work out his deepest-seated problems in a public, improvised therapy session.

He was tip-toeing along the most unstable fault line in American music: the place where the tectonic plates of blues and gospel meet and grind against each other. These two musics — so similar in sound and emotion, but so different in subject matter — have always shunned each other in public while borrowing from each other in private. Nowhere else in American culture is the struggle between body and soul, biology and sublimation, played out so clearly. And no one has wrestled with these issues more vigorously than Green.

"There are tremendous message contradictions," Green told me in 1983, "but as for musical contradictions, not so much."

Back at the Saenger, he signaled to his terrific funk band, and they leapt into the sinuous R&B beat of his 1975 number-one hit, "L-O-V-E." In his strange, slightly nasal Southern voice, Green cooed, "I decided to write this song about you," with a seductive intimacy and built the number's momentum by punching out syllables to reinforce the groove and then shooting overhead in a falsetto before shouting out the big chorus climax, "Give me more L-O-V-E, love!" By the time the three-man horn section took its break, Green was hopping around the stage on one leg.

As if to prove what kind of love he was talking about, however, he segued into "In The Holy Name Of Jesus." Likewise, when he sang his famous arrangement of the Bee Gees' "How Can You Mend A Broken Heart," he ended with a whispered answer, "Only With Jesus." He was trying his best to erase the boundary between his past and his present, the world and the church.

"People say you shouldn't sing all those old songs if you're a preacher," he told the audience — or maybe himself. "I say, 'Oh, yes, I should.' God made man; God made woman; God made love."

That's the question, isn't it? If there is a God who created human beings with powerful sexual and romantic urges, where do you draw the line between the divine and the sinful? Even if you're an atheist, where do you draw the line between your most idealistic urges and your most primal? Green's music investigates these dilemmas as thoroughly as any book of philosophy.

At the Saenger he shifted to an explicitly religious song, "Jesus Will Fix It," but it rocked harder and faster than any of the secular tunes. The lyrics may have been aimed heavenward, but music was aimed at the pelvis. As the band dug deeper into the groove, Green grunted and moaned about his trust in the Lord. He started jumping about the stage again and then leapt right into the welcoming crowd.

It was one of the most astonishing hours of music I have ever experienced. No experimental jazz band has ever improvised as intuitively as Green did that night. No singer-songwriter has ever explored the boundary between doubt and optimism so fearlessly. No R&B singer has ever achieved such otherworldly vocal effects. But for all his efforts to pull gospel and blues together, that fault line remained as unstable as ever.

Yet there wouldn't be gospel music as we know it if not for Georgia Tom Dorsey. This pianist for blues queen Ma Rainey recorded the best-selling, raunchy 1928 hit, "It's Tight Like That," with Tampa Red. But when his wife Nettie died in childbirth in 1932, Dorsey had a religious conversion and wrote "Take My Hand, Precious Lord," a song that obviously drew from the Africanized blues tradition and sounded very different from the more European-sounding spirituals that dominated black churches. Soon black composers in churches across the country were setting religious lyrics to blues tunes, and modern gospel was born.

And there wouldn't have been early rock and roll and R&B without gospel. On an early 1954 session for Atlantic Records, Ray Charles took the old hymn, "My Jesus Is All The World To Me" and turned the phrase, "I've got a Savior way over Jordan; he's saved my soul, oh yeah," and had changed it to "I've got a woman way across town; she's good to me, oh yeah." "I Got A Woman" was a #1 R&B hit, and is often described as the first "soul" record.

But as much as it excited some listeners, it horrified others. It was sacrilegious, they said, to take a song of God and turn it into a bluesy declaration of lust. What they didn't say was how shockingly easy it was to make the change. It was as if Charles was proving that divine worship and romantic lust were not as different as people liked to believe. Soon he was turning "This Little Light Of Mine" into "This Little Girl Of Mine" and "Hallelujah! I Love Him So" into "Hallelujah, I Love Her So."

The now-70-year-old Green, whose classic albums for Hi Records have been back in circulation since the blues label Fat Possum acquired the rights in 2009, grew up in Forrest City, Arkansas (40 miles west of Memphis), and later in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He was hearing and singing gospel music before he even knew what it was.

"I was raised on it," he told me. "It was put in my cornbread. I ate it. My mother and my father, they were Baptists. We were raised in church, and we sang at home. I started when I was a little pee-wee. I was just raised on the sound of Sam Cooke and the Soul Stirrers, and the whole trip. Yeah, that was in the house."

Green joined his brothers in the family gospel group, the Green Brothers, and his shimmering tenor gave him the lead spot. Green, however, was soon slipping down to the local record shop to hear the latest sides by Cooke — who by then had emigrated from the church to the go-go — and by Jackie Wilson, whose wriggling hips and ecstatic falsetto Green would soon emulate. When his father discovered this new enthusiasm for the devil's music, he kicked young Al out of the group and out of the house.

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Like so many soul singers, Green's complicated, conflicted feelings about the church were thus tangled up in his feelings about his parents. When I asked him if his parents liked his pop music, his big smile, the tapping of his big diamond ring on the table and his exultant "yeahs" suddenly dried up. "No," he said. "They were gospel folks." A long pause followed.

In 1967 Green had a modest hit with "Back Up Train," but it wasn't till he met trumpeter Willie Mitchell in Midland, Texas, in 1969, that he had the right collaborator. He followed the trumpeter back to Memphis. Mitchell was a staff producer for Hi Records there and had already assembled a superb band anchored by the Hodges brothers: guitarist Teenie, keyboardist Charles and bassist Leroy. All Mitchell needed was the right voice.

Green's was that voice. It seemed to defy gravity as it grew in intensity and rose in pitch. It had a soft-slurring sensuality that blended the urbane sophistication of Northern soul with the holy-roller roots of Southern soul. A remake of the Temptations' "I Can't Get Next To You" went to #11 on the soul charts in 1970; "Tired Of Being Alone" sold a million in 1971; "Let's Stay Together" topped the pop charts that same year. For the next four years Green dominated the singles charts with a consistency matched only by Elton John.

But the tension between blues and gospel never went away. He had a born-again conversion experience in 1973, but he continued his R&B career as if nothing had happened. But the seeming conflict between the two gnawed at him.

"At every concert, at every gateway, every doorway, every time a stage light would come on," Green told me, "I had trouble delivering the message that was not about the transformation in my life. People were asking, 'What's happening with this guy?' But I couldn't explain it to them. Nobody would have believed me. Nobody wanted to believe me, because they wanted to deal with what they were dealing with: love and happiness and kicks and the whole thing. 'We're not going to get stoned?' they'd say. 'Oh, man, please.'"

All these conflicts came to a head in 1977's *The Belle Album*, the crowning artistic achievement of Green's career. He announced to the world — through eight, brilliant, original songs — that Jesus had become his number-one priority. The whole album was addressed to a woman, Belle, explaining that his desires for her now had to be subordinated to devotion to the Lord. On the title track, he sang, "It's you that I want, but it's Him that I need." Green then ascended into the most unearthly falsetto one is ever likely to hear, as if his body had finally given up all resistance to his impulses, spiritual or otherwise.

"It was hard for me," he said of changing genres in mid-career. "You're already up there at the top with all the charade that goes with it. But that doesn't make or break a man." Is it possible to have both Belle and the Lord? "Yeah, if you have them right. If you find some Belle you like, and you love her, marry her. That'll be your Belle, and then you don't have to worry about the other Belles. That's right. Yes, yes. I have my Belle. Ding-a-ling-a-ling."

In 1978, Green released *Truth n' Time*, a worthy enough footnote to *The Belle Album*. But after that he moved to the Christian label Myrrh and began releasing albums of all religious material. The singing and playing were still admirable, but they felt constrained, as if Green could no longer explore his doubts and conflicts, because religion was supposed to erase all uncertainties. As a result, none of his post-1979 recordings come close to his pre-1979 studio work. Green continued to make brilliant music, but you could only hear it on the stage.

Green's church services are astonishing pieces of theater.

Or in his church. In 1976 Green became the pastor of the Full Gospel Tabernacle in South Memphis, just down the street from Graceland. You go south on Elvis Presley Boulevard and turn right on Hale Road. There you'll find the wood-and-brick church with its octagonal sanctuary. The eight wooden beams arch past the crazy-quilt, stained-glass windows above the semi-circle of pews. Almost every Sunday Green is there preaching and singing.

I've visited half a dozen times, and I've never received anything but a warm welcome. The service begins at 10 a.m., but Reverend Al doesn't make his first appearance till 11:30 or noon. He strolls into the sanctuary in his modest afro, thick glasses and a floor-length black robe highlighted by purple stripes and gold piping. He greets the congregation like a TV talk-show host before reading a bit of scripture. As he tries to explicate the passage, it becomes clear he's ad-libbing every bit as much as he does on the codas of his live numbers. His digressions may cause him to break into song, and the five-man band is expected to recognize the chord changes quickly and back him up.

When I visited in 2009, for example, Green made a joke about trying the tolerance of his congregation with his leisurely, meandering approach to preaching. He urged them to be patient by singing Kris Kristofferson's "One Day At A Time." He punctuated the song by shouting, "Hee haw!" and breaking into giggles.

"You're not going to hear that in any other church this morning," he boasted. "You can do something like that when you own the church." He laughed again, but tried to get serious. "I'm sorry I can't be what you want me to be, but I have to be what the Lord wants me to be. God is love, and He brings us happiness, 'Love and Happiness.'" Here he sang just the chorus of his old hit. "Don't come here just looking for a song," he admonished us, "because a song can't save you. Only God can save you."

A few minutes later he was singing Hank Williams' "I Saw The Light." He then answered the congregation's unspoken objections by saying, "Some people say, 'How can you sing that song in church by a man who stayed drunk 24 hours a day?' I say, 'That's between him and God. I don't care if he drank; I only care that he saw the light.'" He then sang Audio Adrenaline's 1990 hit, "Can't Take God Away," with a dizzying mix of low growls and falsetto screams.

Green's church services are astonishing pieces of theater, full of improvisation and wacky humor. One time, when his exegesis of the Bible got so convoluted and bizarre that even Green couldn't follow his own train of thought, he just threw his arms up in the air and declared, "Sometimes I walk into a room and forget why I came in there. 'Why did I come in here?' I ask myself. They say it's when you start answering yourself that you're really in trouble."

Maybe that's the secret of Green's ability to bridge the gap between blues and gospel: his willingness to laugh at himself when things get too knotty. A current of childish, playful humor has always flowed under his steamiest love songs and his holiest hymns, giving them a buoyancy our more self-important artists too often lack. When his anguish over reconciling the secular and sacred halves of his career becomes too much, he just chuckles it away.

"I'm proud of our past," he told me in 1983. "We sang about the love message, not the trip-out message. I don't turn my back on it at all. If people want to dance, I think they ought to dance. I think people who are familiar with my past and accept it will also accept our future. So we are stepping back into the future. Whew! That's a heavy statement. I just thought of that myself. My granddaddy would love that. He'd say, 'Bam! Tell 'em, boy.'" ★

MEMPHIS IN PHOTOS

BY CAINE O'REAR | PHOTOS BY KATE CAUTHEN

THE LORRAINE MOTEL

Memphis is a town still wrestling with its past, and its musical heritage cannot be understood without some knowledge of its history. Just south of downtown Memphis, a few blocks from the Mississippi River, sits the Lorraine Motel, the spot where Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in April of 1968. The motel is now part of the National Civil Rights Museum, a necessary stop that offers great insight into the South's complicated past.

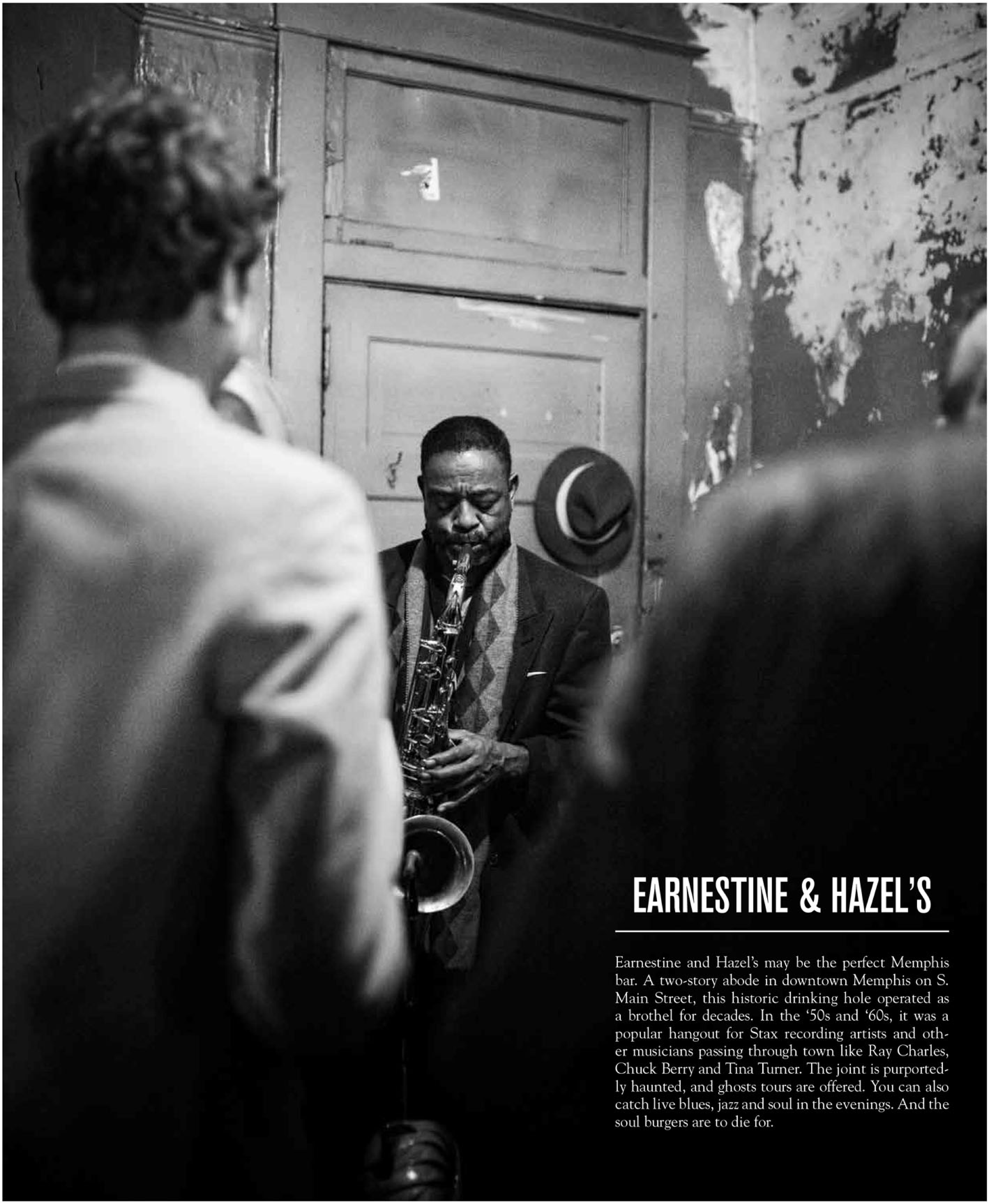
SUN STUDIOS

Because the Elvis legend looms so large, it's easy to forget about all the *other* history that went down in this little building on Union Avenue under the direction of Sam Phillips. It was here in 1951, for instance, that Jackie Brenston and his Delta Cats cut "Rocket 88," a song widely considered to be the first true rock and roll record. The museum does a great job of showing just how visonary Sam Phillips was and how much American music owes him.

PAULA & RAIFORD'S DISCO

It's after midnight when you walk into Raiford's. The speakers are blasting Prince and for a moment you are lost in the billows of pink and purple haze jetting out of the smoke machine. The dance floor is humming and there's a stray yahoo swinging from a stripper pole. In other words, it's business as usual at this 40-year-old Memphis institution.

Perched atop a tiny alcove, wearing dark sunglasses and spinning records, is the king of the Memphis disco scene himself, DJ Hollywood Raiford. A sign that reads "No requests" hangs beside him. The tunes are chosen based on the vibe of the dancers on the floor, and, for now, the vibe screams Michael Jackson. Raiford's is the perfect place to cap the night, but it's not for the faint of heart.



EARNESTINE & HAZEL'S

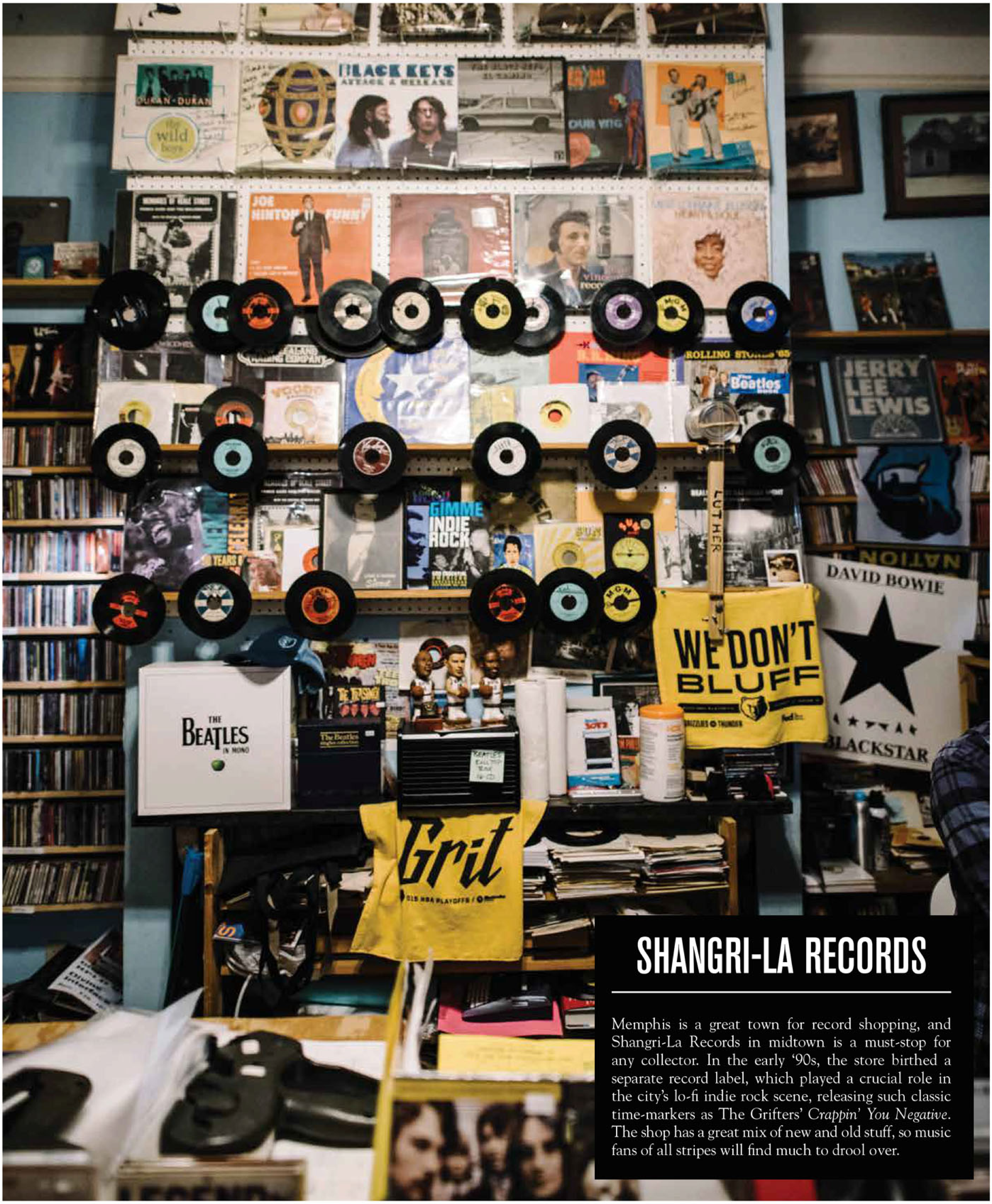
Earnestine and Hazel's may be the perfect Memphis bar. A two-story abode in downtown Memphis on S. Main Street, this historic drinking hole operated as a brothel for decades. In the '50s and '60s, it was a popular hangout for Stax recording artists and other musicians passing through town like Ray Charles, Chuck Berry and Tina Turner. The joint is purportedly haunted, and ghosts tours are offered. You can also catch live blues, jazz and soul in the evenings. And the soul burgers are to die for.

ARDENT STUDIOS

Ardent Studios, founded by Memphis native John Fry in the mid-'60s and originally run out of his family's garage, is best known as the studio where all three Big Star albums were recorded. Now located on Madison Avenue in midtown Memphis, Ardent also served as the occasional home for legendary producer Jim Dickinson, who produced The Replacements' *Pleased To Meet Me* within its confines. Studio tours are offered on an appointment basis.

THE "LISA MARIE" AT GRACELAND

No trip to Memphis would be complete without a visit to Graceland. And the crown jewel of the King's estate may very well be the "Lisa Marie," the 880 Convair jet that Elvis purchased in 1975 for a quarter-million dollars. When Lisa Marie, the jet's namesake, was just a toddler, Elvis flew out to Los Angeles to pick her up at Priscilla's, then flew her to Denver so she could see snow for the first time. He then dropped her back off in L.A. later that day before making the flight back home to Memphis. What a guy.

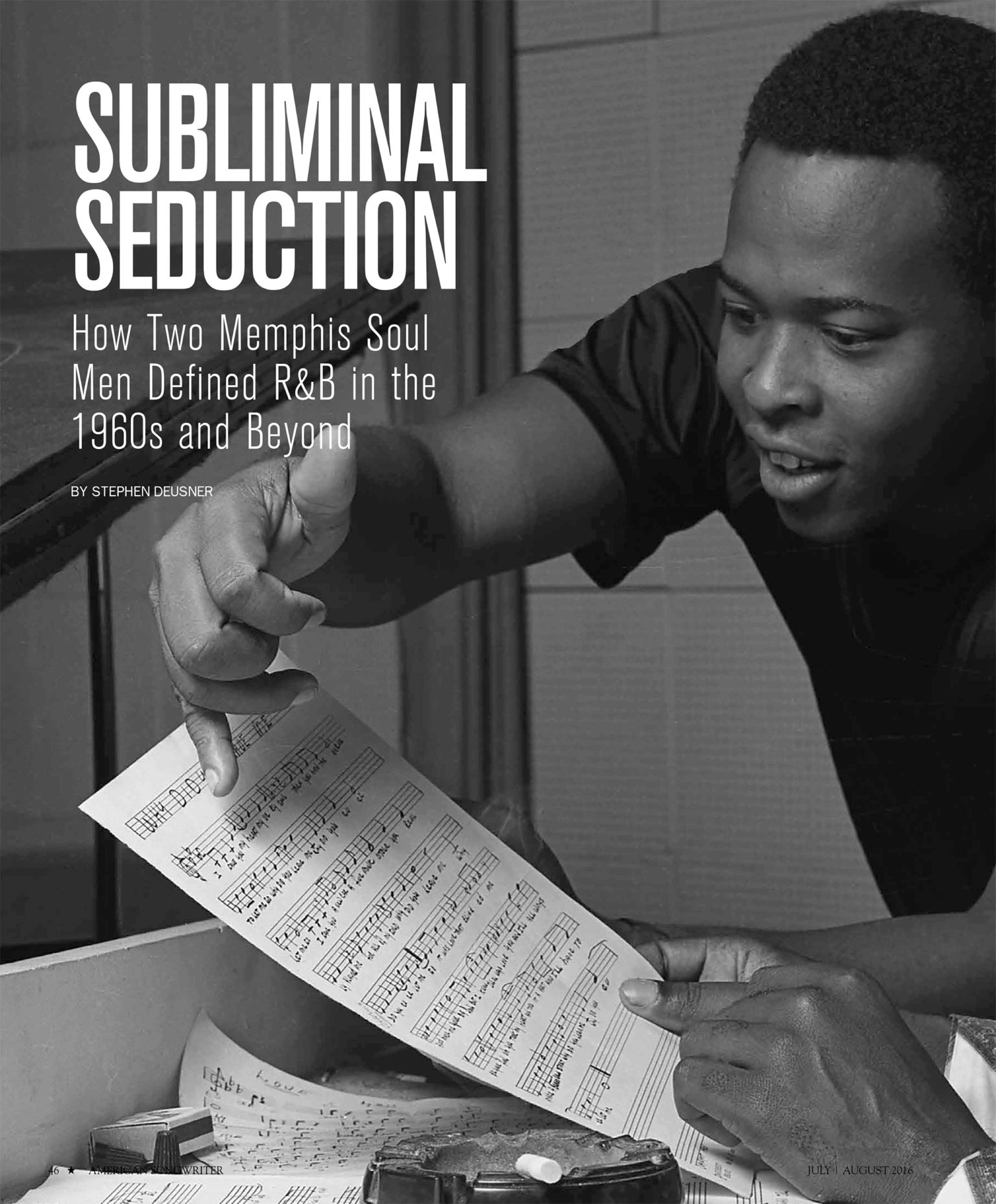


SHANGRI-LA RECORDS

Memphis is a great town for record shopping, and Shangri-La Records in midtown is a must-stop for any collector. In the early '90s, the store birthed a separate record label, which played a crucial role in the city's lo-fi indie rock scene, releasing such classic time-markers as The Grifters' *Crappin' You Negative*. The shop has a great mix of new and old stuff, so music fans of all stripes will find much to drool over.

BEALE STREET

Every stroll through Memphis should at one point find you "walking with your feet ten feet off of Beale," as Marc Cohn famously sang in his love letter to the Bluff City. And though much of Beale is geared toward the beer-guzzling tourist contingent, there is enough history permeating this neon-lit street to satisfy even the most obscure-loving hipster.



SUBLIMINAL SEDUCTION

How Two Memphis Soul Men Defined R&B in the 1960s and Beyond

BY STEPHEN DEUSNER

Photo by @API photographers B Carrier

Stax songwriters Isaac Hayes and David Porter.

Pictured left to r: Sam Moore, Isaac Hayes, Andrew Love, Wayne Jackson, Dave Prater, Jim Stewart, and Steve Cropper in Stax Records' famed Studio A.

Photo by @API photographers B Carrier

IT WAS SUMMER 1967, and Isaac Hayes was in Memphis watching Detroit burn.

The local news carried alarming reports of a massive riot in Motor City, which started when a police raid on an after-hours bar turned into a tense standoff with patrons and bystanders. Governor George W. Romney (father of Mitt) deployed the Michigan National Guard to quell the violence, which lasted five days altogether, left 43 people dead, nearly 1,200 injured, more than 7,000 arrested, and thousands of buildings burned or ransacked. Even at the time, it was seen as a major event in the American Civil Rights movement, as well as proof that racial friction was not limited to the South.

Hayes, an untrained but deeply talented musician who had found steady work as a songwriter at Stax Records in Memphis, watched as the news report explained that black business owners had been spray-painting the word *soul* on their buildings to let the demonstrators know not to break those windows. Hayes recounts the story in Robert Gordon's essential history *Respect Yourself: Stax Records and the Soul Explosion*: "I realized the word *soul* keeps them from burning up their establishments. Wow, soul. Soul. Soul man." The phrase stuck in Hayes' head, and he mentioned it to his songwriting partner, David Porter. Together, they crafted one of the biggest R&B hits of the decade — of the century, even — based on that one word and all that it represented.

Written, rehearsed, recorded, pressed, and released barely two months after the Detroit riots, "Soul Man" is an impossibly taut and exciting R&B stomper credited to the duo Sam & Dave (a.k.a Double Dynamite) but featuring nearly everyone at the label. It opens with Steve Cropper's swampy guitar overture, a tangle of bent notes prefiguring the distinctive southern rock sound of the early '70s. But that's just the prelude: When the band enters, the song snaps into its relentless groove, as Sam Moore and Dave Prater trade verses: "Comin' to you, on a dusty road / Good lovin', I got a truckload."

The song packs a lot into its not-quite-three-minutes. One second Sam & Dave are declaring themselves unparalleled lovers ("When I start lovin', I can't stop"), and the next they're making a subtle declaration of community ("Grab a rope, I'll pull you in/ Give you hope"). Was it a love song? An issues song? Or was it somehow both, their romantic confidence conveying a very timely sense of black pride? And then there's the fact that it was recorded by an integrated crew of musicians. Today that might not sound like a big deal, but in '67 it was a rarity. And in the South it was downright dangerous. Yet, here was a group of white and black players finding common ground and mutual respect, enacting something like racial harmony (or racial groove?) on a small scale. They're all soul men.

"Soul Man" scalded the radio, spending seven weeks at the top of the R&B charts and peaking at number two on the pop charts. It was the most successful single Stax had released, and nearly 40 years later it remains a stone-cold rock classic, the rare song that sounds like the times yet is ultimately timeless. Looking back nearly 50 years later, David Porter says, "We were always looking for ways to connect. We wanted to make a person feel a certain kind of thing, but we also wanted to have some kind of universality attached to it. With 'Soul Man,' our purpose was to create a motivational thing for people during a trying time in this country. If you listen to what the song is really saying, anyone could be a soul man."

And perhaps that is why "Soul Man" is more than just a big pop hit. It's a powerful statement that defines the Stax ethos — a song about how songs ought to be sung. You perform them with grit and integrity. You play them like you know that a sharp guitar riff or a bold horn line or a chugging rhythm section or a guttural holler might solve any problem big or small, personal or public. You sing every word with soul.

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Nearly a decade before the Detroit riots, a country fiddler and bank manager named Jim Stewart moved his fledgling recording studio from a garage in rural Brunswick, Tennessee, into an empty theater on McLemore Avenue. At the time it was called Satellite Records, although that name

Isaac Hayes' gold-plated Cadillac on display at the Stax Museum. Photo by Kate Cauthen.

Album art for Sam & Dave single "Hold On, I'm Comin'". Photo by Kate Cauthen.

would soon change. In the space next door was a small record shop where Stewart's sister Estelle Axton worked, and across the street was a grocery store where a young kid named David Porter was toiling away as a bag boy. Barely 19, just out of high school, just married, and recently a father, he dreamed of becoming a full-time musician and was gigging around town under the stage name Little David. He even went so far as to record and release his own single, "Ain't That A Lot Of Love," which went nowhere.

Curious about the new record label across the street, Porter started hanging out in the record shop. "Estelle was an extremely nice lady who saw a passion in me. She would play music to sell to the customers, and I would see what people were buying, then we'd talk. She would say, 'This is the kind of records people are buying, so if you're interested in doing music, just look at some of these examples of what works.'"

Porter further ingratiated himself by bringing some of his talented friends into the studio, including Booker T. Jones (later of Booker T. & the MGs fame), Andrew Love (one half of the Memphis Horns), and William Bell (who penned the soul standard "You Don't Miss Your Water"). Country & western tunes weren't selling, and the influx of neighborhood kids gradually shifted the company's focus to urban R&B. By the time they had big hits with the Mar-Keys' instrumental "Last Night" and Carla Thomas's "Gee Whiz," Satellite Records had changed its name to Stax (a combination of the names STewart and AXton).

"Part of our focus was making the music communicate subliminally."
— David Porter

"They wanted to develop more of an expertise in R&B music, and it just so happened that I looked like somebody who might know something about that," says Porter with a laugh. "I told them I wanted to get involved and asked if I could work there, but I didn't realize they didn't have a lot of money at the time. For whatever reason they decided to give me a shot."

Making Porter the label's first staff songwriter would prove to be a fortuitous decision, but at first he struggled to find a partner. It wasn't until he started working with Isaac Hayes, then playing keyboards as a session musician, that everything clicked. Hayes had grown up out in Covington, Tennessee, before moving to the city and eventually playing in a variety of local doo-wop, R&B, and rock groups.

But before they were partners and friends, Porter and Hayes were local rivals. "On Wednesday nights the Palace Theater on Beale Street would host talent shows," Porter explains, "and we would compete to win three dollars, five dollars, depending on how much of an audience there was. I had a group called the Marquettes, and he was the leader of a group called the Teen Tones. We had no idea that in the future we would connect."

Porter approached him about forming a songwriting partnership, something like Holland-Dozier-Holland up in Detroit or Burt Bacharach and Hal David in New York. Hayes was a self-taught musician who learned the ropes on the local club circuit, yet he could play any instrument you handed him, in particular the piano. He also possessed an intuitive understanding of how songs fit together, how arrangements were built, and how to get other people to play the sounds that were in his head. They both understood that they could create bigger things together than they could individually.

Almost immediately, the team began racking up hits for Stax in 1966: a pair of modest singles for Johnny Taylor, a song called "I'll Run Your Hurt Away" by Ruby Johnson, and two smashes for Carla Thomas, including the sublime "B-A-B-Y." Porter and Hayes were putting Stax on the map.

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"The story of Stax is about empowerment and opportunity and resiliency," says Jeff Kollath, executive director of the Stax Museum of American Soul Music. "Opportunities abounded at Stax in the early years. If you could sing, you got a chance to sing. If you could play guitar, you got a chance to play guitar."

David Porter and Isaac Hayes could write songs, so they got a chance to write songs. Not only that, but they were able to determine what songwriting would entail at Stax. It wasn't just devising the lyrics and the melody, then handing it off to the next person on the assembly line. Instead, the duo worked at every stage of the process, ushering a song from its conception all the way through to its release. Porter and Hayes were composers and lyricists, producers and session players, studio engineers and idea men.

They were able to fulfill so many responsibilities precisely because they had little formal musical training. Neither read music or had the technical ability to notate music, so they had to devise new ways to convey their ideas to the Stax musicians and singers. Porter describes their method: "We would give the bass a line to play, then go to the guitar, then to the horns, and then we would orchestrate the vocals. I would stand on one side of the microphone and direct the singer as though I was directing a choir." He and

Hayes built songs from the ground up. "We were fortunate to stumble into that. It was one thing to say we were geniuses, but that wasn't it. We just knew what we wanted to do, and it was working."

Around the Stax offices on McLemore, Porter and Hayes were inseparable. They worked round the clock, huddled together to work out new compositions or collaborating with musicians to produce songs on which they would get no billing. (For the Bar-Kays' signature hit "Soul Finger," Porter recruited neighborhood kids to give the song its party atmosphere, creating one of the liveliest and most distinctive instrumental singles of the decade.) When the hits started coming in, they bought matching clothes, even identical cars.

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Their greatest subject was romance, from the puppy-love excitement of Carla Thomas's "B-A-B-Y" to the adult trials of "When Something Is Wrong With My Baby," a hit for Sam & Dave. Every song, no matter its mood or tempo, is celebratory, the tone determinedly optimistic — which distinguishes the duo from the gender recriminations of blues and rock. These aren't songs about women doing their men wrong, but about men and women supporting and encouraging each other.

David Porter and Isaac Hayes were composers and lyricists, producers and session players, studio engineers and idea men.

"Part of our focus was making the music communicate subliminally," says Porter. "It was about making the music and the message and the melody each talk individually and tell a story that would work on an emotional level. I called it subliminal seduction: making someone fall in love with the song, and they like what the overall thing is but don't know all of the things that cause them to feel that way."

Take "When Something Is Wrong With My Baby," which they wrote for Sam & Dave in '67. Porter was feeling pretty down one day, moping in his living room, when his wife put her arms around him and commiserated, "What's wrong? Is something wrong with my baby?" Not anymore. The question flipped a switch in his brain, and he raced to meet up with Hayes and sketch out a song.

The resulting single opens with a time-stopping duet, just Moore and Prater wringing every last ounce of anguish out of the title. Earning their reputation as Double Dynamite, they draw each syllable out sympathetically, which teases the listener's attention. Then, the horns come in, followed by the drums and guitar, each instrument sympathetic and gentle, as if this moment between lovers is fragile and precious:

When something is wrong with my baby
something is wrong with me.
If I know she is worried,
Then I would feel that same misery.

It's a reassuring hug of a song, a quiet declaration of support in trying times, and it works both straightforwardly and subliminally.

Porter and Hayes did some of their best work for Sam & Dave, giving them a string of hits that established the duo as one of the most exciting live acts in the world — not just "Soul Man" and "When Something Is Wrong With My Baby," but "You Got Me Hummin'," "Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody," "I Thank You," and "Wrap It Up." They took inspiration wherever they found it. On "You Don't Know Like I Know" Porter and Hayes transformed an old church hymn into an ode to romantic love, changing "… what the Lord has done for me" into "… what that woman has done for me." It hit number 7 on the R&B charts in 1966.

One of their greatest compositions was written in the men's room at Stax. The two were working out a new song in the studio but having a tough go of it. Porter retired to the restroom while Hayes continued brainstorming, finally landing on the right chords. Hayes yelled for his partner, and Porter yelled back, "Hold on! I'm coming!" By the time he joined Hayes, he had the foundation for Sam & Dave's biggest hit.

But circumstances beyond their control — in particular the business machinations between Stax and Atlantic Records — would test their friendship and destroy their partnership.

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The long story is very long, but the short story goes something like this: Atlantic Records had been distributing Stax since 1961, and when the larger label was sold to Warner in 1967, it allowed Jim Stewart and Estelle Axton, along with new partner Al Bell, to renegotiate the terms of the agreement. During that time they discovered that Atlantic owned the rights to all previous masters, which infuriated Stewart in particular. In response, they did not re-sign with Warner and sold the company to Paramount Pictures/Gulf+Western. In the deal, Stax lost its entire back catalog, along with its biggest act, Sam & Dave.

The deal benefitted none of the artists. Sam & Dave soldiered on, but they would never have another hit even close to what they had enjoyed with Stax. They broke up and

re-formed several times through the 1970s, before Prater died in 1987. Porter and Hayes, meanwhile, lost their primary outlet, their best act — the other two sides of the least square square. They wrote a few more hits for the Soul Children, the Emotions, and Homer Banks (better known as a songwriter than as a recording artist), but nothing quite burned up the charts. Who knows what they might have accomplished together in the 1970s if Isaac Hayes hadn't become the biggest star in the world?

In 1969 Hayes recorded a solo album called *Hot Buttered Soul*, tracking the sessions at Ardent Studios in Midtown Memphis with members of the Bar-Kays and string arrangements by Motown's Johnny Allen. It was his second effort, after his underperforming debut *Introducing Isaac Hayes* the year before, and Stax had few plans for the record. *Hot Buttered Soul* was defiantly eccentric, featuring just four songs clocking in anywhere from four minutes to 18. Hayes had been playing solo shows around Memphis, often launching into long speeches between songs, the mellowest preacher imaginable holding forth on matters of romance and trust and sex. He drew large crowds, women mobbing the stage and men often glaring from the back of the room. Hayes preserves that delivery on *Hot Buttered Soul*, providing a 9-minute spoken-word introduction to his cover of Jimmy Webb's "By The Time I Get To Phoenix."

The album was a smash the likes of which Stax had never seen and Hayes could never have predicted, and it very quickly established Hayes as a sex symbol for the new decades and turned his tight pants and chainmail shirt into iconic fashion symbols. It exploded the rules of R&B: three-minute pop songs were out, ambitiously orchestrated soul suites were in. Hayes would transform from a songwriter into a song deconstructor, taking apart hits by a range of well-regarded composers and refashioning them in unexpected ways.

Porter was no less ambitious, but he could not match his partner's newfound success. But how could anyone? The duo had been working on Porter's debut, but the success of *Hot Buttered Soul* made it impossible for Hayes to see it through. He ended up listing his friend as sole producer, even though it was a collaborative effort. Released in 1970, *Gritty Groovy & Gettin' It* gently updates the classic Stax soul sound, adding string arrangements and extended running times, but neither it nor the follow-up, 1971's *... Into A Real Thing*, caused much of a stir. Perhaps they would have sounded a bit old-fashioned at the time, especially at a moment of such transition in R&B, but more than 40 years later, they sound fresh, inspired, newly engaging and bold.

Porter's third and (at least to date) final album is another thing altogether. *Victim of the Joke?... An Opera*, released in 1973, intersperses original songs and covers with several playacted scenes — part concept album, part radio play. A bit awkward at times, a bit conceptually top-heavy, it sounds like nothing else ever attempted before or since, and it includes a song that Porter counts as his very best. "That song was 'Storm In The Summertime,' and boy, just that title ... I don't even know how I came up with it. Stumbling upon that was just so magical, and I think it's one of the greatest songs I ever wrote. But I didn't do the greatest job of singing it. At some point I'm going to have to find someone who's better at singing and get them to give it a try."

If none of the albums established him as a superstar, they have proved to be incredibly inspiring to subsequent generations of musicians and cratediggers. A wild array of artists has sampled Porter's solo tunes, including Public Enemy, Wu-Tang Clan, and the Notorious B.I.G. "I've had people come up to me over the years and tell me how much they love [*Victim of the Joke?*]. I didn't realize it had that kind of credibility attached to it in people's minds."

As Hayes was ascending — touring constantly, winning an Oscar for "Theme from *Shaft*," headlining the epochal Wattstax concert in 1972 — the label itself was floundering, brought down by some ill-advised deals and some unscrupulous investors. But that's another story — a good one, to be sure, but the main point is that Porter was there through the very end. When the label didn't have the money to issue checks to its hard-working staff, he paid them out of his own pocket. "Porter comes through as one of the heroes in Stax's last days," says Gordon. "He worked hard to keep the company alive."

Still, Stax closed its doors in 1976.

The building was torn down in 1989.

But the Stax Museum of American Soul Music opened in 2003.

The Stax Music Academy opened the same year and the Soulsville Charter School in 2005. It's taken decades, but Stax has risen from the ashes as both a label and an educational organization, which are testaments to the label's incredible roster of talented locals — including Porter and Hayes. Likewise, the Consortium MMT (which stands for Memphis Music Town) is an organization that Porter established to provide educational and musical opportunities for local youth.

"I thought I might have a perspective that could have some merit to young people now," he says, "and it felt like it would be a shame if I just stayed on the golf course all day. What I've found is that there are a lot of very talented young people who appreciate the concepts and thought processes that we used in the '60s and '70s to make those great records." In many ways the Consortium MMT is an extension of Porter's work at Stax, back when he was recruiting his talented friends and working his way into the company. The idea is the same: get people involved, create something new.

"I remember thinking, 'Why couldn't we be successful doing the kind of music that was such a part of our upbringing? Why couldn't we put a little bit of the church in this music that has a rhythm and a beat?' Isaac was a visionary and I was a visionary, too, and we just saw that this could be something truly meaningful." ★

A LEGACY LIVES ON
AT STAX MUSIC ACADEMY

After-school program offers at-risk Memphis youth musical training, life lessons

BY EMILY MAXWELL

Jadan Graves, a student at The Soulsville Charter School, practices piano at the Stax Music Academy after school. Photo by Kate Cauthen.

Though it's been decades since the legendary Stax recording studio closed its doors — and more than 13 years now since they were reopened as part of the Stax Museum of American Soul Music — the legacy of the music recorded within its walls still lives on in the students of the Stax Music Academy.

Located down the street from the museum, the Academy serves as an after-school program for primarily at-risk youth from Memphis and its neighboring areas. It started in June 2000 in the cafeteria of an elementary school; music teachers and volunteers from local music organizations met with 125 children each afternoon for a month during the summer, offering kids the chance to learn about music and parents a safe place to drop off their children during the workday.

In 2002, the operation moved from the lunchroom to its own building, down the street from the then-unopened Stax Museum on East McLemore Avenue in South Memphis.

"The initial goal was to build a Stax museum on the original site and a music school for kids in the neighborhood because there were no opportunities for them," says Tim Sampson, a mentor who helped launch the program and the communications director of the Soulsville Foundation, which works to educate people about the neighborhood's history. "[The neighborhood] was crime-ridden and blighted and there wasn't much for kids to do except to get in trouble or stay home and watch television, if they had one. The founders of the museum decided to build the music school first because they thought it was more important to have something for the kids than it was to have a museum."

Following the move, the program changed its focus from elementary students to middle and high schoolers, teaming up with Soulsville Charter School, a local college preparatory academy that is located next door. It currently hosts around 130 students from 2 p.m. to 7 p.m. Monday through Friday. After gaining acceptance (students have to audition in order to attend), the teenagers have the choice of joining two of eight ensembles: Street Corner Harmonies, the school's largest ensemble, an a cappella-based vocal group that incorporates choreography, stepping, and drama elements; the Drum Line; the Rhythm Section, a mid-sized vocal and instrumental group that focuses on Stax classics; Production, which trains students on both live and studio recording; Jazz Band, a full, big band jazz group that includes horns, guitar, bass and piano players; Vocal Jazz, a small, intense a cappella group; and a middle-school-only Rhythm Section.

Each ensemble performs frequently, and not just at local spots in Memphis — students have performed at the National Mall and Kennedy Center in Washington D.C., Lincoln Center in New York City and other venues across the globe. In 2012, a group of students traveled to Berlin to perform for the U.S. Ambassadors to Germany.

> **"We're just trying to get these kids ready for college. Ready for life, mainly."**
>
> **—Tim Sampson, mentor**

The school is staffed by highly dedicated teachers from various musical backgrounds, many of whom are artists in their own right. "Everybody who works here takes on the Stax Music Academy students like their own kids," says Sampson. Adrianna Christmas, a vocal instructor and the school's interim artistic director, says she enjoys seeing how much the students grow musically throughout their time at the academy.

"I have some students that came in whispering, and now they're finally letting big, beautiful voices out," says Christmas. "They're all so talented. You watch them go into the practice rooms all the time and then they get that one solo and it's like, 'Man! That's what it is.'"

Many former Stax artists engage with the program, telling their stories of the Stax days, holding workshops and performing with the various ensembles. Floyd Newman, Booker T and the MG's, the Bar-Kays and the Astors have all spent time with students. Betty Crutcher, the most successful female songwriter in Stax history and a co-writer on Johnnie Taylor's "Who's Making Love," has visited the school to teach masterclasses on songwriting. "The Stax artists do whatever they can," says Sampson. "A lot of them are still very busy touring, but anytime they can do anything for the Academy, they do."

Outside of the classroom, teachers and mentors are able to offer help and guidance to students that they may not receive from other adults in their lives.

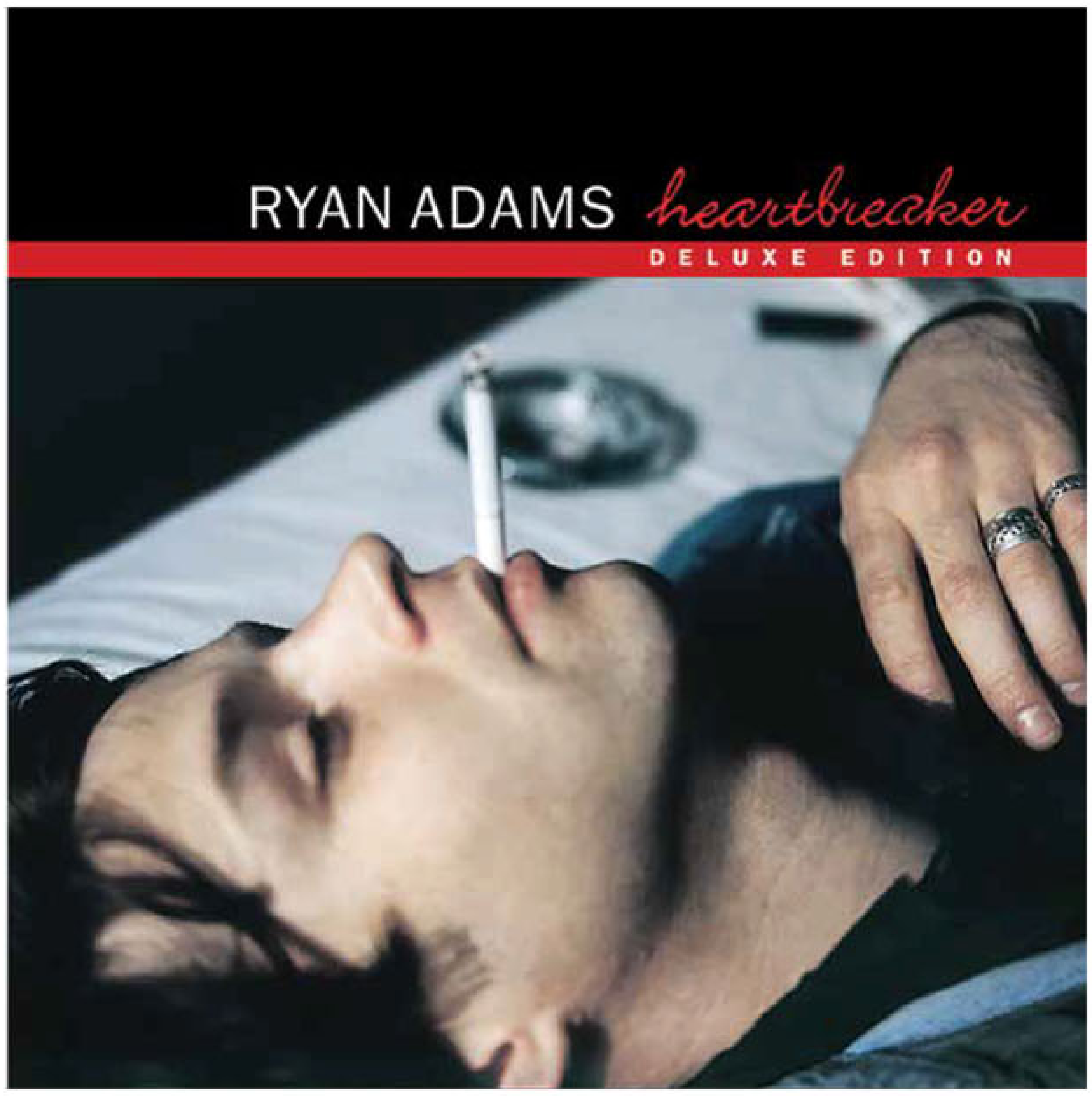
"We aren't necessarily trying to crank out professional musicians," says Sampson. "We're just trying to get these kids ready for college. Ready for life, mainly. Across the board, we try to take care of everything about them while we have them here."

Christmas tries to spend any extra downtime chatting with students about their lives outside of the program and offering guidance and advice where it's needed.

"We're able to talk to them about more than just music, like aspirations, college applications and scholarships, because we also offer college prep," says Christmas. "We even touch on small things, like conflict resolution — like, 'Okay they gave you this grade. Did you earn it? Did you do your homework?' Small things, but also big things — we're able to teach them life skills, like how to negotiate with authority or how to deal with conflict between their peers. We also have family resources that we're able to connect the students with. What keeps us coming in to work every day and what we get the most excited about is seeing them grow personally."

The Academy and its staff have had an undeniable impact on the students. One hundred percent of its attendees were accepted to college in 2015; roughly 40 percent received music-related scholarships. Many students go on to study music at the university level, some at the country's most prestigious music schools, including Berklee College of Music in Boston. During summer breaks, program graduates can join the Stax Music Academy Alumni Band, a group of 11 singers and musicians who perform tunes from the Stax catalogue at paying gigs several times a week around Memphis, including a Tuesday slot at the Stax Museum itself. This past June, the group opened for Al Green at Memphis' Orpheum Theatre.

Sampson, who tries his best to keep in contact with alumni after they've moved on, says his involvement in the program has been immeasurably rewarding. "It's really fun to watch how successful they have become, both as people who work in the music business and as performing artists and session players. Getting to know them on a one-on-one basis has been one of the greatest things in my life." ★



DIARRHEA PLANET

TURN TO GOLD

(INFINITY CAT/DINE ALONE) ★ ★ ★ 1/2

THERE'S NO SENSE IN GRIPING about this Nashville band's non-PC name other than to say it's likely they won't be called for Earth Day celebrations. That, and a suggestion to queasy listeners not to steer clear due to Diarrhea Planet's over-the-top qualities, especially since it's no more outrageous than having four guitars and three lead vocalists vying for the spotlight.

But what could be a raucous mess is smartly written, well produced and arranged hard rock/power pop with slight prog and punk tendencies. The opening "Announcement" hits those bases; with its message of finding inner strength in the face of life's adversities, it's an indication of the rest of the album's — all credited to the entire six piece — balance of powerful lyrics with a driving attack. The sound, somewhere between Cheap Trick, Blue Oyster Cult and Weezer, grabs elements that twist into razor-sharp tunes making effective use of the quadruple guitars without geeking out. While there are lighter moments, such as in "Bob Dylan's Grandma" where Emmett Miller recounts his love of guitars from back in the sixth grade, the majority of these rugged, six-string heavy tracks involve deeper, introspective emotions that never seem flippant or insincere.

Credit the band for crafty songsmithing but also producer Vance Powell. He captures the hard-touring act's natural energetic interaction by recording the main guitars and drums live in the studio. That dynamism is palpable over the act's third and most mature full-length. But it's especially evident on its most audacious moment: the closing, nearly eight-minute "Headband," a suite of sorts that shifts tempos and styles from pensive to blustery as it tells the alarming tale of a protagonist who might be insane.

Clearly this group shouldn't be defined by their repulsive moniker. Those less offended will find *Turn To Gold* one of this year's better rock albums and one that should make DP if not quite a household name, at least one taken seriously. — HAL HOROWITZ

RYAN ADAMS

HEARTBREAKER – DELUXE EDITION

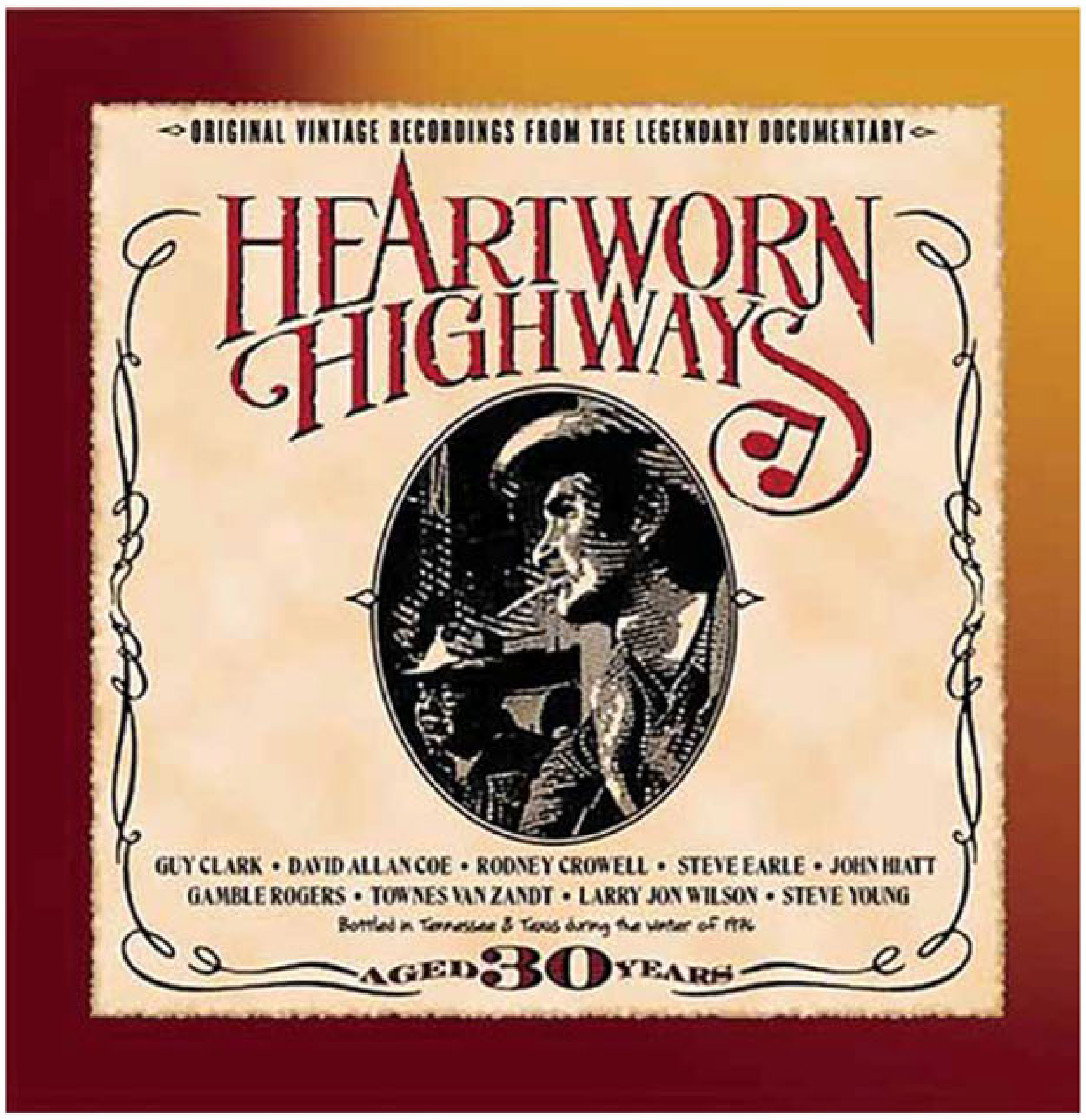
(PAX-AM) ★ ★ ★ ★ 1/2

IS ANYBODY SURPRISED that Ryan Adams possessed a ton of leftover material to grace the reissue of his 2000 solo debut album *Heartbreaker*? This is a guy who routinely drops albums out of the blue and finds time for all manner of detours from his main singing-songwriting outlet. Why should he have been any less productive in the beginning?

Sure enough, the unused originals on the extra disc wouldn't have shamed *Heartbreaker* at all, with the hushed "War Horse" and the driving "Petal In A Rainstorm" being particular standouts. There isn't anything quite so revelatory among the alternate versions of the tracks that eventually made the final album, although the wild punk jam tacked onto the otherwise earnest "Come Pick Me Up" is pretty funny. The fly-on-the-wall moments are interesting though, like a discussion about beloved guitars with Emmylou Harris and the impromptu version of Morrissey's "Hairdresser On Fire" which led to the argument with David Rawlings that Adams included at the start of the album.

As for the original album, Adams' ramshackle confidence still amazes, belying the fact that it was his first solo shot. He proved right off the bat that he could find that sweet spot between Bob Dylan's brattiness ("To Be Young (Is To Be Sad, Is To Be High)") and Gram Parsons' tenderness ("Oh My Sweet Carolina").

What's also striking is how convincingly Adams played the role of sensitive ne'er-do-well even then; others have spent careers trying to cultivate that stance and can't approach the authenticity he had right out of the gate. *Heartbreaker* gets all the bells and whistles it deserves in this deluxe edition, but the fact that it contains some of the earliest and best examples of Adams' prolific, prodigious talent means it really doesn't need any extras to be worth it.
— JIM BEVIGLIA



ROBERT ELLIS

ROBERT ELLIS

(NEW WEST) ★ ★ ★ 1/2

WITH ITS CONTEMPLATIVE storytelling and meandering, Paul Simon-meets-George Jones melodies, Robert Ellis' breakthrough 2014 record *The Lights From The Chemical Plant* positioned the Houston-bred singer at the very forefront of Americana's vanguard. Two years later, Ellis, at just 27 years old, is back with his self-titled fourth album, his finest work to date.

Most impressive are the leaps and risks Ellis, who self-produced the record, takes as he expands the typical country-folk palette with elaborate arrangements featuring MIDI keyboards, string sections, ambient noise, and synths. Aided by jazz-influenced guitarist Kelly Doyle, Ellis' musical vision for country music in 2016 is just as boldly left-of-center as fellow new traditionalist Sturgill Simpson's.

Ellis is at his best here when he's pushing his own musical boundaries and testing out his thoroughly modern take on roots music, be it the convincing radio-rock grab "How I Love You," or "California," a pulsing, 21st-century update on soft '70s country-rock, or "It's Not OK," the bouncy piano pop album closer that devolves into a grungy-guitar freakout.

These new textures don't just make for a more interesting sound, they've also clearly challenged Ellis to work harder as a songwriter, as evidenced on the wandering country lament "Drivin'" and the retro pastiche "Couples Skate." "Elephant" and "Perfect Strangers," on the other hand, fall victim to Ellis' occasional tendency to over-narrate, imposing drama onto his characters instead of giving their tensions room to breathe on their own. Elsewhere, old friends and contemporaries like Matthew Vazquez of Delta Spirit and Jonny Fritz provide songwriting assistance on several songs.

Robert Ellis' self-titled album is the sound of a young songwriter solidifying his blend of East Nashville country with whatever sounds, styles, and sentiments that suit his interests. Or, as he puts it: "How can you call it art when you're sticking to a dotted line?" — JONATHAN BERNSTEIN

VARIOUS ARTISTS

'HEARTWORN HIGHWAYS' SOUNDTRACK

(LIGHT IN THE ATTIC) ★ ★ ★ ★

THOUGH MOST SONGWRITERS won't say so, they all know the ultimate test of their talent is time. If their songs remain known decades after they were first scribbled on fast-food bags or late-payment notices, the dream has been fulfilled.

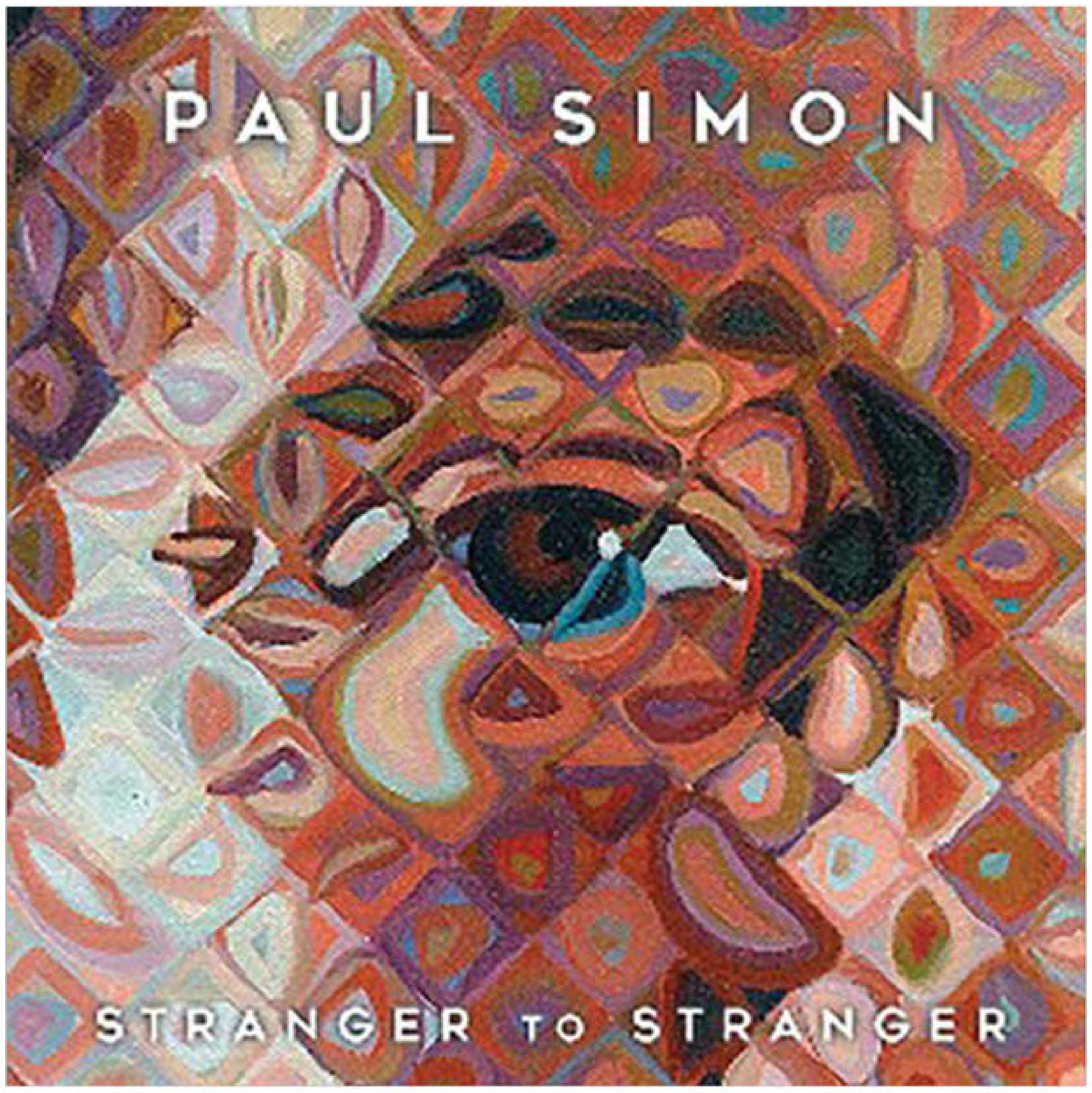
When director Jim Szalapski filmed his 1976 documentary *Heartworn Highways*, he captured a crop of ascendant songwriters and younger acolytes whose work already seemed destined for immortality. But listening to this soundtrack release 40 years later makes it even clearer why Guy Clark, Townes Van Zandt, John Hiatt, Rodney Crowell, Steve Earle and other artists here are among our most revered: Their ability to reveal themselves to us — and shine mirrors into our souls — can still take our breath away.

"Heartworn" is a perfect description of Clark's "L.A. Freeway," "That Old Time Feeling" and "Desperados Waiting for A Train." They sound weary, lived in. Poignant. The same goes for David Allan Coe's "I Still Sing The Old Songs." Van Zandt, on the other hand, sings "Waiting 'Round to Die" and "Pancho and Lefty" from a heart that's not just worn, it's worn out. Too scarred to save. But it was a price he willingly paid for the dream.

Fortunately, Crowell, Hiatt and Earle learned enough from their elders to avoid Van Zandt's fate. Hearing them in almost still-embryonic form (before those lessons were learned, in some cases) is yet another fascinating element of this collection.

Dialogue snippets from the film are sprinkled within; the best is Gamble Rogers' hilarious "Charlie's Place" story. Other leavening comes from Clark's "Texas Cookin'," Earle's "Darlin' Commit Me" and a charmingly mangled "Silent Night" sing-along.

"I just wanted you to know the true story so you'd understand where art comes from," Gamble explains before singing "The Black Label Blues." He'd be happy to know generations of songwriters are hanging on every word. — LYNNE MARGOLIS



SARAH JAROSZ

UNDERCURRENT

(SUGAR HILL) ★ ★ ★ 1/2

SINGER/SONGWRITER/MULTI-INSTRUMENTALIST Sarah Jarosz sounded like an old soul even on her 2009 debut as a precocious and remarkably talented 17-year-old phenomenon. Now, as a grizzled 24 year old on her fourth release, she has more questions than answers. While that's not unusual for anyone her age, those uncertainties about love, life and uncertain paths forward are funneled into compelling folk with hints of country and even subtle pop.

Vocally, Jarosz has become additionally nuanced, potent and confident after recently graduating from the New England Conservatory of Music. Her restrained hooks on the angry "House Of Mercy," where she dismisses what seems to be an over-eager suiter, shift the mood from tender to tough through modulations in the music and her supple voice.

Although the nearly all-acoustic album (only a few selections have understated electric guitar) is often stripped to just Jarosz (who plays octave mandolin, guitar and banjo) the spare instrumentation spotlights the singer's vocals, lyrics and tunes that float on beds of finger-picked chords. Tour mates Aoife O'Donovan and Sara Watkins make occasional appearances, most impressively on "Still Life," a somber yet vibrant ballad that wonders about a relationship ("Have I lost myself to lust/ Is there anyone that I can trust?"). But this is clearly the work of Jarosz, who doesn't need much assistance.

Jarosz is a talented player but she minimizes her instrumental contributions; that move highlights these splendid songs, vocals and lyrics, like those on the stark "Lost Dog," which uses the titular animal as a metaphor for life accompanied by basic banjo. The tracks are more compelling and effective with the nominal accompaniment Jarosz applies.

The result is a frequently brooding album, personal and reflective with beautifully conceived words and melodies ripe for repeated listens. Nothing is forced or rushed on this generally contemplative set but, as the title implies, its powerful undercurrents will draw you in. — HAL HOROWITZ

PAUL SIMON

STRANGER TO STRANGER

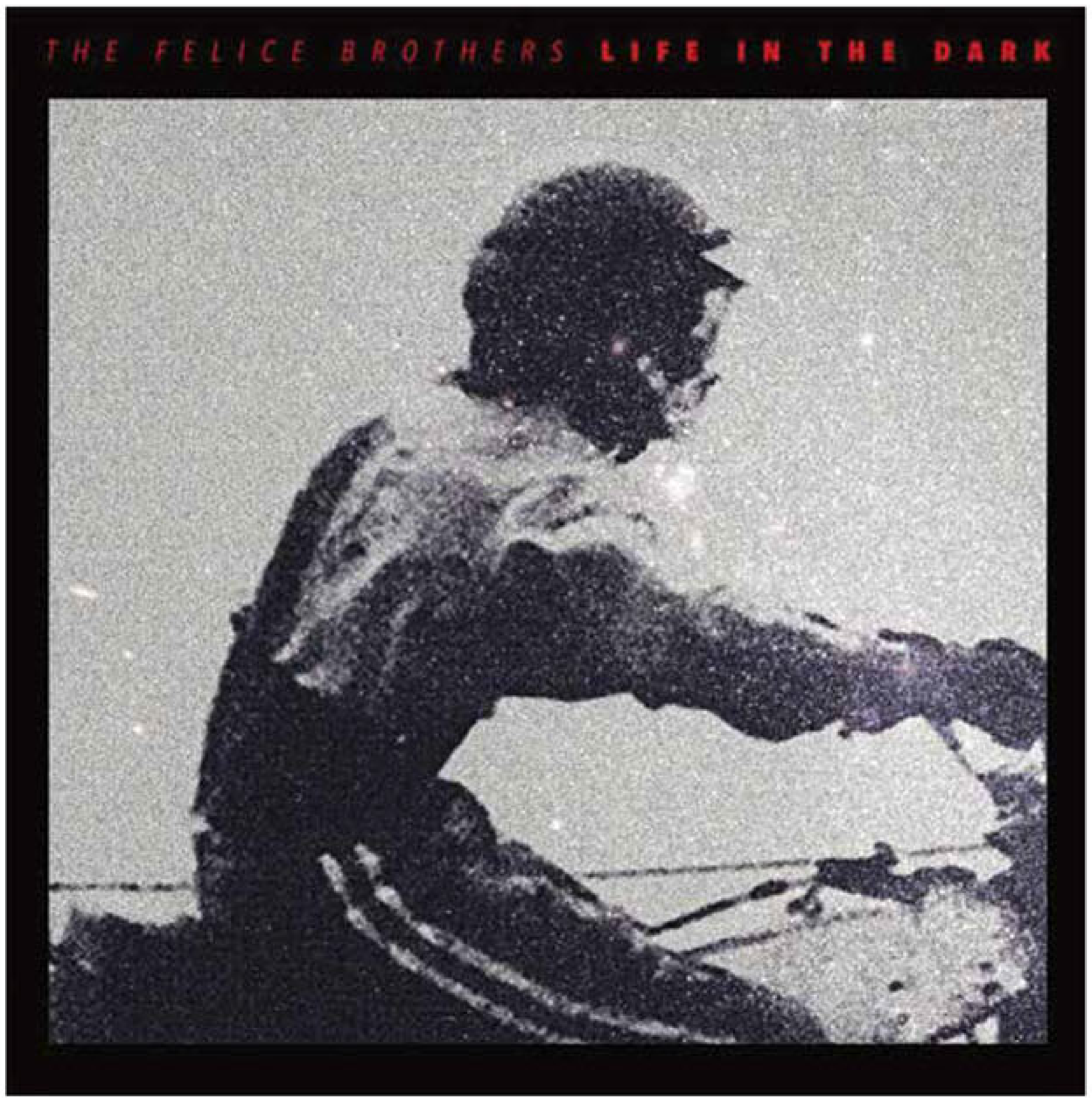
(CONCORD) ★ ★ ★ ★

PAUL SIMON'S ETERNAL search for rhythmic and sonic ingenuity continues on *Stranger To Stranger*, his 12th solo album. Carrying over the momentum from his last excellent release, 2011's *So Beautiful Or So What*, this disc features Simon at his most restless, in terms of both his questioning lyrics and his search for the right sound, and that restlessness pays off for the listener in endlessly fascinating ways.

Starting with the one-two punch of "The Werewolf," a kind of state-of-the-crappy-world anthem that drips with deadpan humor, and "Wristband," a relentlessly rhythmic tale that conflates Simon getting locked out of his own concert with a meditation on the haves and have-nots, *Stranger To Stranger* immediately ingratiates with its reckless attitude to traditional folk and rock structures and sounds. You need not know what instruments like the gopichand and Chromelodeon look like; you only need know that they serve Simon's attempts to make the music sound as vibrant coming out of the speakers as possible.

The album contains other fun musical moments, like the tuba-laced "Cool Papa Bell," but this wouldn't be Simon if he didn't take some solemn looks both outside at the world around him and inside at his own conflicted heart. "Proof Of Love" rides high on Vincent Nguini's probing acoustic guitar and Simon's heartfelt beseeching to the heavens, while "The Riverbank" contemplates the effect of a soldier's death on a small community.

Stranger To Stranger closes out with "Insomniac's Lullaby," part circus waltz and part delicate ballad, as Simon sends one out to those wrestling with problems that won't allow the sweet dreams to come. "And when at times my words desert me/ Music is the tongue I speak," the narrator of "Proof Of Love" admits. This album is just more evidence that few have ever been as fluent in that tongue as Paul Simon. — JIM BEVIGLIA



FELICE BROTHERS

LIFE IN THE DARK

(YEP ROC) ★ ★ ★ 1/2

AFTER POLISHING UP their studio methods with their last two albums, The Felice Brothers revert back to old tricks with their latest LP, *Life In The Dark*.

The Hudson Valley-based band's new studio album finds them sticking to what they know, and perhaps do best: acoustic arrangements — heavy on fiddle, accordion and loose harmony backup vocals — that provide natural templates for Ian Felice's twisted tales of the American underbelly.

Ian Felice has always been the group's primary voice, but *Life In The Dark* is the band's first proper record in which Ian handles all singing duties. The counterbalance typically provided by James Felice's deep, rich baritone is surely missed, but Ian Felice seems newly focused on *Life In The Dark*, channeling his energy into a mix of modern murder ballads ("Diamond Belle"), oddball polemics poking fun at late capitalism ("Plunder"), and pained personal narratives of disappointment and despair ("Life In The Dark," "Sell The House").

The Felice Brothers' music has always been grounded in a pastoral American romanticism, and this batch of songs plays out as an aural cross-country trip of sorts, criss-crossing from Jacksonville to Buffalo to Duluth to Dodge City, all the way to Death Valley. Along the way, Ian Felice takes stock of a country littered with prescription medicine, obscene wealth and commandeering corporate control. Yet he can't help but watch the empire's decline with amazed nostalgia: "America, you give me dreams to dream, popcorn memories, and love," he sings on the Walt Whitman-inspired "Jack In the Asylum." Elsewhere, he considers an ex's quotidian whereabouts with utter disdain: "Eating sherbert/ In some sad suburbia/ And dating a disturbing profiteer."

On *Life In The Dark*, the Felice Brothers continue their decade-plus quest of chronicling our crooked national pathologies with quirky humor, slacker indifference and guarded folkie optimism. Never before have the Felice Brothers taken in their country with so much wide-eyed wonder. — JONATHAN BERNSTEIN.

MUDCRUTCH

2

(REPRISE) ★ ★ ★ ★ 1/2

MOST TOM PETTY fans thought they would never see one Mudcrutch album, let alone two.

To catch everyone up on Heartbreakers trivia, the backstory goes that in 1974, a scraggly Florida outfit with the unwieldy name of Mudcrutch — bassist/singer/songwriter Petty along with keyboardist Benmont Tench, Tom Leaden on guitar and drummer Randall Marsh — headed to L.A. to find fame and fortune. They recorded a few tunes and soon disbanded. But since Petty was signed to the Shelter label, he kept Tench, added Mike Campbell and the rest of the original group, and the Heartbreakers was born.

In 2008, Petty unexpectedly revived the name, bringing back Leaden, and Marsh, adding longtime sidekick Campbell and releasing what became Mudcrutch's belated debut.

Eight years later, Petty gives the venture another go-round. This one ups the energy a few notches, especially on the pounding garage pulsing "Hope" which, with its cheesy Farfisa organ, sounds like a pretty good Standells B-side. Tench takes another vocal turn on the dryly humorous boogie-woogie "Welcome To Hell" and guitarist Campbell gets a rare chance to sing on his lone writing contribution, the chugging "Victim Of Circumstance."

Not surprisingly, Petty contributes the bulk of the material with seven new tunes (out of 11), all of them up to the high standards he has set for himself throughout his stellar 40-and-counting year career. Even Petty experts would have trouble telling the first three tracks aren't new TP & the HB tunes since they ride that well established sweet spot between chiming Byrds-influenced rocking and impossible to resist choruses. That's particularly true of "Dreams Of Flying," a mid-tempo nugget every bit as good as his best work.

As usual, Petty makes it seem easy. And with help from his fellow Mudcrutchers, the unassumingly titled *2* is proof that even Tom Petty's modest side projects are better and more compelling than many acts at their best. — HAL HOROWITZ

LYRIC CONTEST

1ST PLACE

"SET IN HER WAYS"

Rick Leather
White Rock, British Columbia, Canada

She wakes me with a whisper, soft as a breeze
A fresh cup of coffee and a kiss on my cheek
I'm lost in her lovin' and I'll never stray
I guess you could say I'm set in her ways

She holds our sweet babies like they're diamonds or gold
When a friend's heart gets broken, she's there with her own
There ain't one thing about her that I'd ever change
I guess you could say I'm set in her ways

Now it's her way or the highway when she meets life head on
She'll fight for what's right when someone's done her wrong
I fall deeper and deeper with each passing day
I guess you could say I'm set in her ways

She makes time to listen to what's on my mind
And her touch does the talkin' when we turn out the lights
From sun up to sun down she keeps me amazed
I guess you could say I'm set in her ways

I'm lost in her lovin and I'll never stray
I guess you could say, I'm set in her ways

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2ND PLACE

"ALL ABOUT LEAVING"

Tom Waldenberg
Austin, Texas

By the time that I'd met you
I'd been running myself ragged
A trail of my mistakes
Stretching from here
clear to the Atlantic
Like the fool that I am
I followed in others' footsteps
Straight into the quicksand
Now I'm in up to my neck

My grandfather taught me
how to save all my money
Like my father taught me
how to throw it away
Northern women taught me
all about leaving
Maybe you could teach me
how to stay
Maybe you could teach me
how to stay

I've been drunk
since last December
And I don't see an end in sight
Someday I might get sober
But not tonight
For the darker side of life
Is where I've made my home
May the coolness of your lips
Lay a blanket on my bones

My grandmother taught me
how to stand up tall
My mother taught me
when to walk away
Northern winters taught me
all about leaving
Maybe you could teach me
how to stay
Maybe you could teach me
how to stay

The casinos on the coast
Shine like dreams in the night
I could make it for last call
If I leave
with the last of the light
But forgiveness is a long road
To walk without a friend
I've been there before
And I can't go back again

For I've taught myself
Almost everything I know
All the joys of love
and the heartbreak
All my life I've learned
how to leave
Maybe you could teach me
how to stay
Maybe you could teach me
how to stay
Maybe you could teach me
how to stay
Maybe you could teach me
how to stay

JULY AUGUST WINNERS

3RD PLACE

"SKELETON KEYS"
Garry Morse
Colonial Heights, Virginia

A shoebox of letters
With photos inside
Spills out on my rug
on the floor
They're all that are left
'Cept ashes and empties
After she walked
out my door.

Those memories
Are the skeleton keys
To all of the
places we'd been
And her sweet smiles
That never quite
reached her eyes
Remind me of
the pain she was in.

But memories
are tricky things
They retreat,
and they attack
You believe
that you remember
But as you travel back
The mind is not a mirror
It adds, and it subtracts
Old memories don't reflect
… they refract.

Now the writers
are drinking their coffee
The poets
are digging in deep
Street people keep on
playin' for free

I'm just hopin' my soul
will keep.
'Cause even my parts
are in pieces
Hanging ragged
from some rugged cross
I walk on
whiskey splinters now
My heart can't
bear the cost.

'Cause these memories
Are the skeleton keys
To all of the
places we've been
And your sweet smiles
That never quite
reached your eyes
Remind me of
the pain that I'm in.

Yeah, memories
are tricky things
They retreat,
and they attack
You believe
that you remember
But as you travel back
The mind is not a mirror
It adds, and it subtracts
Old memories don't reflect
… they refract.

A shoebox of letters
With photos inside
Spilled out on my rug
on the floor.

4TH PLACE

"DIRTY LITTLE SECRET"
Sadie Hart
Nashville, Tennessee

You are always doin' laundry
You are always cleanin' house
You are always burnin' palo santo
Must have bad vibes to clear out

You prefer me in the bedroom
But you don't look into my eyes
Then I wonder why I'm starving
When all you do is feed me lies

I feel like a dirty little secret,
Little secret, that you keep
No one knows your dirty little secret,
Little secret, shame on me

Any time I have a shining moment
You are never by my side
Always wind up in your shadow
No matter how hard I try

Let me see behind your shiny image
Let me peek between your lines
I won't go and blow your cover
It's easy to deny the signs

That I am just a dirty little secret,
Little secret, that you keep
No one knows your dirty little secret,
Little secret, shame on me

First you sweep me off my feet
Then you sweep me underneath your
rug
I was blind but now I see
This ain't love

I'm just a dirty little secret,
Little secret, that you keep
No one knows your dirty little secret,
Little secret, shame on me

I'm just a dirty little secret,
Little secret, never tell
No one knows your dirty little secret
But little secrets don't keep well

HONORABLE MENTION

"We Are Yours"
Dana Wahlbeck
Largo, Florida

"Never Miss The Water"
Mick Evans
Bristol, Somerset, United Kingdom

"Why Does Goodbye Have To Last So Long?"
Joe Colavito
Ringwood, New Jersey

"My Praying Knees"
Patrycya Hill
Mooresville, North Carolina

"All I Never Wanted"
Rick Leather
White Rock, British Columbia, Canada

"Gulf Coast Skies"
David McMillin
Chicago, Illinois

"This Old Heart Keeps A-Beating"
Paul Nunes
Fairport, New York

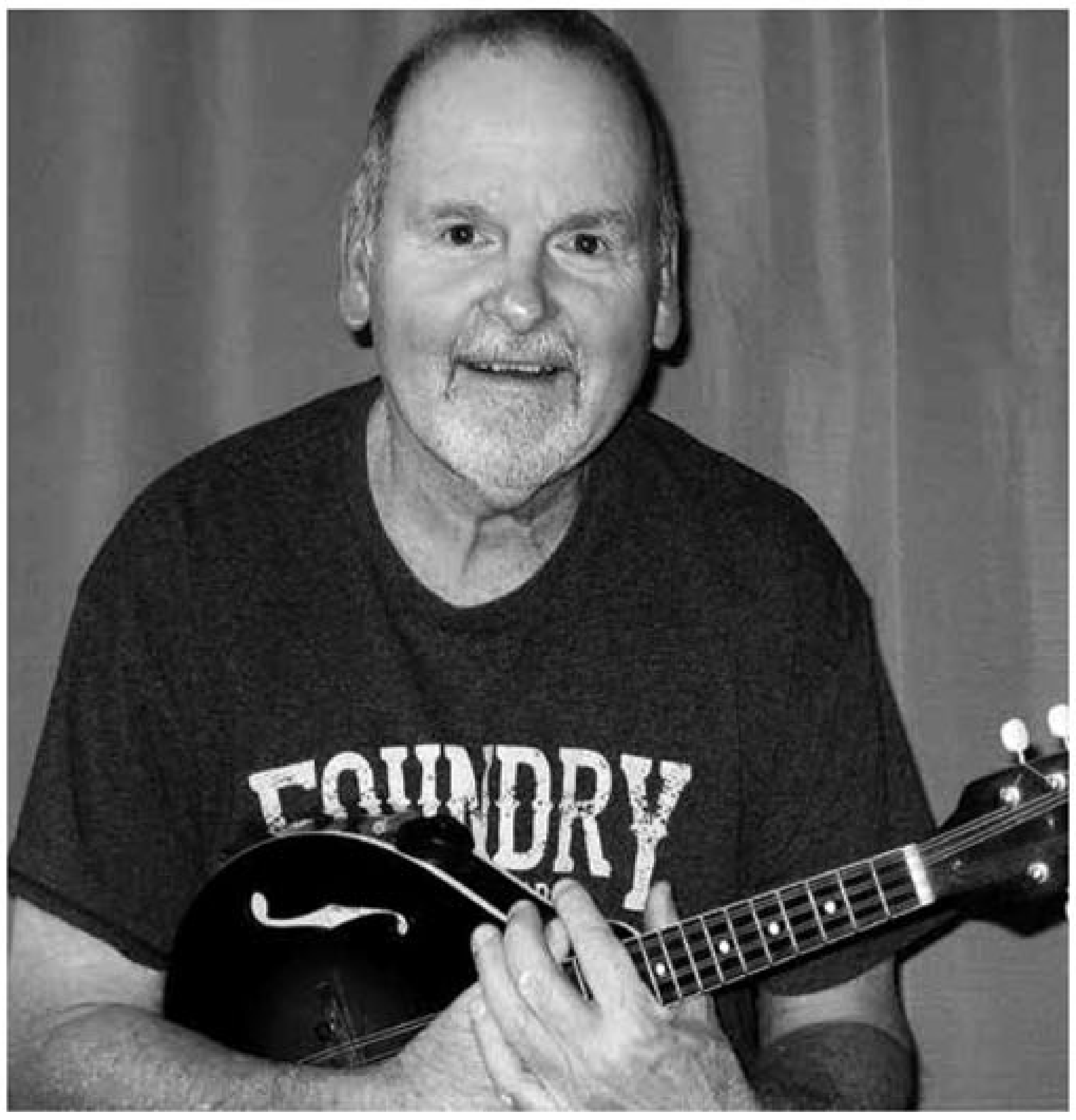
"(Rewriting) The Girl"
Matthew Tanner
New York, New York

"I Didn't Cry"
Jennifer Middleton
Denver, Colorado

"Inventory"
Kerann Christophers
Morgan Hill, California

AMERICAN SONGWRITER LYRIC CONTEST Q&A

1ST PLACE



"Set In Her Ways"

Written by Rick Leather

Interview by Caine O'Rear

Where did the phrase "I'm Set In Her Ways" come from?
The spark for the tune was the phrase "I guess you could say *she's* set in her ways" and the ease with which it rolls off the tongue. But, as often happens for me, I began working that idea in my head and almost absent-mindedly began repeating "I guess you could say *I'm* set in her ways" and immediately felt that I'd stumbled upon an approach that could be far more interesting. In that sense, the twist on the title/hook was a gift.

Was this your first lyric contest entry?
I've entered the *American Songwriter* lyric writing contest several times in the past few years. The idea of submitting just the lyric rather than entering music and lyrics in a contest sounded more and more appealing as production trends in mainstream music seem to take precedent over lyrics. For me, it's about the substance and the craft first, so it's particularly rewarding to have a song acknowledged on that basis alone.

Are you a performer as well?
I think the live setting is invaluable for a songwriter in terms of instantly being able to monitor feedback to your song, see if folks are singing a chorus or a phrase back to you, see whether you've been able to capture their attention in an otherwise noisy environment or just determine whether or not it can bring folks to the dance floor, which a slow waltz like "Set In Her Ways" seems to be able to do quite regularly.

Did you flesh out a melody for this and did you record it?
I always try to complete most of the lyric with no music in mind. Then the lyric will dictate how it would like to be sung in terms of phrasing, tempo, style, etc. I never concern myself with the musical aspects until I have at least a chorus and a verse or two on paper. "Set In Her Ways" wanted to be a slow 3/4 time waltz so I obliged and wrote and recorded the music accordingly.

Do you do any other kinds of writing?
Not outside of songwriting, unless writing e-mails to pitch songs counts. Recently, I've been trying my hand at writing mandolin instrumentals. The instrument has become my latest obsession and it's interesting to me how it has informed my songwriting ideas and opened up genre possibilities.

Do you have a line or couplet from "Set In Her Ways" that you're particularly proud of?
"I'm lost in her lovin' and I'll never stray." The writer in me is smiling each time this line comes around.

What are your goals for your songwriting?
I suppose one was met with having "Set In Her Ways" acknowledged and rewarded so generously by *American Songwriter* magazine and the songwriting judges, and of course the Gibson guitar folks. I continually enjoy the challenge of solving a songwriting riddle, exploring the angles and possibilities available to convey my take on a subject or theme. Certainly every songwriter I've ever met wants to share his or her creation and, of course, getting that "big time cut" would be hugely rewarding in that respect.

What is one thing you've learned about songwriting that you wish you'd known when you got started?
Without hesitation I'd say it's the importance of rewriting and the time involved in that. I'd have to thank a great online group of songwriters from the defunct Billy Dean Writers Block, helmed by Jim Scanlan, for that lesson as well as many local writer friends. The constructive and encouraging feedback I've regularly received from such creative and generous folks has taught me what it takes to make a song as good as it can be. Invariably, the first draft of anything I've written will pale in comparison to where it ends up if I'm prepared and willing to dedicate the time and patience to make it better through rewriting. ★

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JEFF SKAGGS (Creative Director, Creative Nation)
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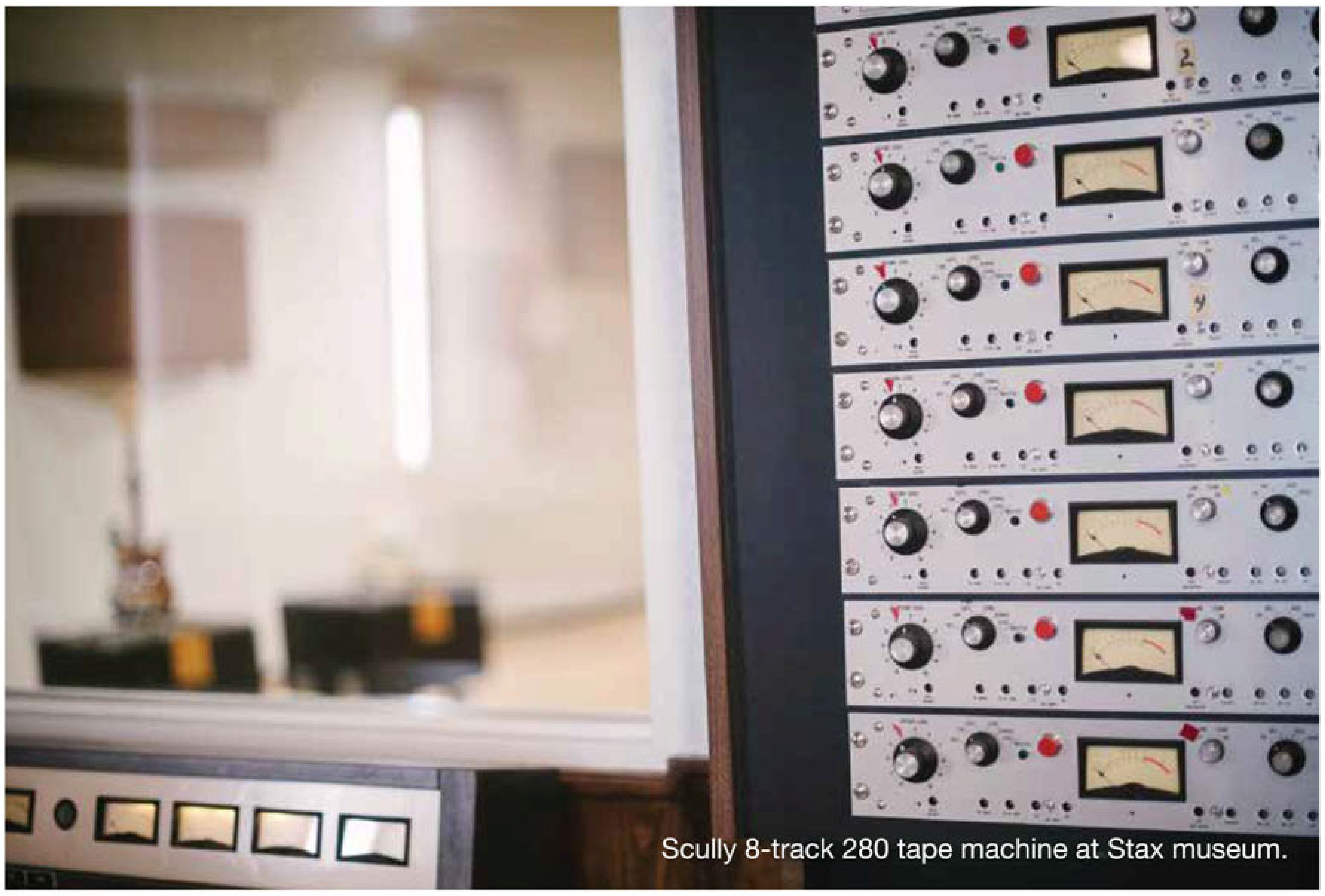
By Andy McDonough

INSIDE THE STAX SOUND


Scully 8-track 280 tape machine at Stax museum.

Like any successful studio, there are stories galore about sessions at Stax, along with details about the equipment, the players and recording techniques. However, it's important to note that the studio area at Stax was a large and, by all accounts, featureless room that was deadened with thick curtains and movable baffles all engineered to provide a quiet space to record. It wasn't fancy and remained that way for many years. Recording techniques there favored the musicians hearing themselves and playing as a group. Virtually unheard of in modern recording studios, recording at Stax was often done without headphones and the small amount of "leakage" between tracks was accepted in favor of an environment where musicians played in the same space, together. It's a simple and effective approach and very much a part of the Memphis Sound.

While what was happening on the recording room floor might have been more simple than today's recording techniques, the technology at the time presented some serious technical challenges for the engineers and producers. A major constraint was the limited number of tracks. This forced decisions to be made early in the process as to what tracks would have to be combined. Any mistakes in the process were costly, so recording sessions needed to be carefully planned out. One thing in their favor was that microphone selection and placement was kept simple. Where, today, we might use several microphones on a drum set to give us the ability to mix more extensively, at Stax, recording drums, a key element in the Memphis sound, was all about the basics.

Without a doubt, the biggest part of the drum sound at Stax would have to be attributed to drummer, Al Jackson, Jr., or in some cases, Willie Hall. Stories from the studio and photographs at the time indicate that Jackson used a Rogers kit mostly, and a chrome-plated Ludwig Supraphonic 400 snare. That snare sound and the drum tuning for the Stax sessions is classic. One favorite trick that many drummers attribute to the Memphis scene was taping a wallet to the top head of the 400 to get just the right deadening effect.

Stax had a very small booth for drums. That means very little "room sound" would make it into a recording and mic'ing the drum set was limited to the bare basics. Frequently, only a Neumann KM-84 was used on the snare drum, but at a distance of as much as eight inches, much further than typically done today. The high hat was almost never mic'd and, typically, one Neumann U-87 or similar overhead mic would have been used to capture the rest of the kit. The bass drum might have an EV RE-20 microphone on it, but that's about it. Bass guitar, bass drum and snare frequently shared track one, with the rest of the drums assigned to track two, leaving more tracks open for the other pieces.

In some ways, the limitations of recording technology at the time kept things simple on Stax recordings. At least, that was the result — a clean, well-defined sound for each instrument, that built into a solid ensemble sound to back the featured performer. These are techniques we can apply today.

Steve Cropper is the guitarist most closely associated with Memphis Soul. His distinctive guitar parts are frequently up front in the mix, but are carefully arranged so as not to detract from the song or the singer's performance. There are many "tasteful" guitarists that are overlooked in popular music, but Cropper's parts are frequently front and center and, more often than not, the iconic guitar parts he creates become identifying elements of the recording. Cropper is most often associated with a clean Fender guitar sound with very little effect added. Interviews with the guitarist and other players of the day confirm that combination of a Fender Esquire (or Telecaster) and a little Fender Harvard amp was used on most of the Stax hits of the 1960s. The Harvard amp is about as basic as you can get: 10 watts with only one tone control and one volume control. Again, we see a carefully arranged but simple approach to the creation of great guitar parts.

Like Cropper's guitar parts, horn parts were also key to the Memphis sound and typically stripped to the basics. The Memphis Soul horn sections, that most often featured a single trumpet with one tenor sax and only occasionally a baritone sax, provided a powerful dimension to songs that already featured powerful singers. That combination was the formula that made hits.

Song forms of the Memphis Soul hits were as basic as the arrangements, sometimes as simple as a 12-bar blues and sometimes with just a simple harmonic twist or repeated riff. Even the studio's rhythmically driven dance material maintained a heart-felt honesty that is immediately clear to the listener. With its distinct blues and gospel influences, Memphis Soul is universally accessible with lyrics that were most often basic and brought you closer to the singer.

Memphis Soul might be over 50 years old, but still has a lot to teach the songwriters and producers who will take the time to explore this great American music. The Memphis Soul sound, perhaps partially due to the technical limitations of the day, is carefully constructed from interwoven parts. It begs to be dissected by savvy musicians. Knowing that, careful listeners can find a common thread of honesty among the basic instrumentation, simple arrangements and heartfelt, soulful vocals. Songwriters, musicians and performers making music that they feel – soul music. ★

Photo by Kate Cauthen

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BY DAVID ALZOFON

MEASURE FOR MEASURE

Major Melancholy

Place: San Francisco
Date: August 1967
Weather: Tangerine skies, with a continued chance of magic on into the night.

It's the *Indian* Summer of Love. In the Haight-Ashbury, ocean breezes tickle dreamcatchers and wind chimes in the porticos of painted ladies and head shops, carrying vague hints of incense and peppermints, patchouli and hashish down neon streets where paisley-clad gypsies roam. Guitars and tambourines keep the beat in Golden Gate Park by day. After dark, the Fillmore Auditorium hosts advanced seminars in psychedelia, courtesy the likes of the Grateful Dead, Jimi Hendrix, Jefferson Airplane, Janis Joplin, Donovan, and Country Joe & the Fish. Vietnam may be raging and draft cards burning, but a visionary spirit of optimism fills the air.

Across the Bay, Stax recording star Otis Redding — also headlining the Fillmore — has another take on things. Sitting on a houseboat in Sausalito, the 26-year-old soul icon opens his notebook and writes, "Sittin' on the dock of the bay, watchin' the tide roll away." Redding, with a string of hits and an acclaimed performance at the Monterey Pop Festival under his belt, is flush with success, so it's hard to say what prompts him to gaze out upon the picturesque beauty of San Francisco Bay and see reflections of failure and loneliness where Scottie McKenzie beheld a love-in. Whatever's brewing inside, he's about to turn it into an immortal hit.

"(Sittin' On) The Dock Of The Bay" belongs to a select group of melancholy songs in a *major* key. "Lodi" by John Fogerty and "Red, Red Wine" by Neil Diamond are two others. "Dock Of The Bay" may sound simple, but subtle poetry lies beneath the surface. Let's consider just one aspect: rainbows. A *rainbow* is an arching melodic phrase. "Dock Of The Bay" is a series of rainbows nested within a single overarching rainbow that peaks in the bridge.

In the breakdown below, "Low-HIGH-Low" points on the arcs are shown in boldface. Important melody notes are referenced by solfa syllables. (For more on rainbows, see eBook 2 and the Nov/Dec 2012 column, "Making Rainbows." See eBook 3 for more on solfa singing. Just email info@americansongwriter.com and write "Request Measure for Measure eBooks" in the subject line.)

VERSE 1 comprises four four-measure rainbows reminiscent of rising and falling tides:

1) | **Sittin'**. . . sun__ | __ I'll be | **SITTIN'**. . . evenin' **come_** | __ | | High note: *Fa*. Redding had just learned a new guitar tuning from cowriter Steve Cropper (open E), and set the lyrics to a gliding succession of major chords created by sliding his hand up and down the neck.

2) | **Watchin'** the ships roll in | Then I | **WATCH** ... a-**gain_** | __ | | Same arc, implying "Stuck on a merry-go-round."

3) | Yeah, **I'm** | sittin'... bay | ... watchin' the **TIDE_** | __ roll a-**way** __ | __ | | This arc hits a new high on *La* in "**TIDE**".

4) | Ooh, I'm just | **sittin' ... BAY** | __ wastin' | **time** __ | _ | | High note: *Re*. The ornamental "*La-Sol*" on "Ooh," echoes "**TIDE**" above. "**Time**" shivers through an *Em* chord, an emotional cry ending in "*Do-La*," a minor-3rd motif that returns an octave higher in the bridge.

VERSE 2: Same as verse 1.

BRIDGE: Falling lines are often sad. Redding uses three falling *half-rainbows* and repeats the sad "*Do-La*" motif four times, generating a cathartic climax.

1) | **LOOKS** like | **NOTH**-in's gonna **change**. | | Highest note in the song, and the "*Do-La*" motif hammers it twice. The steep, descending interval implies stormy emotions.

2) | **EV'**-ry-thing | still ... **same**. | | High note: *La*, backing off the peak.

3) | **I** can't do ... | **TEN** people ... to **do**. | | The *Do-La* motif strikes again, hitting the highest note twice.

4) | **So** I guess ... | the **SA - me**. ____ | | High note: *Ti*. The bluesy b7 on "**So**" glides up a half-step to the leading-tone on "**SA-**", signaling a return to the verse.

VERSE 3: (like verse 1)

CODA: Repeats the Do-La motif offhandedly. Redding whistled because he forgot the words.

These are the short rainbows. The overarching *long* rainbow climbs from *Do* up to *La* in verses 1 and 2, then peaks on high *Do* four times in the bridge before coming down again in verse 3.

Creative Challenge: Write a melancholy song in a major key. Highlight the minor-3rds in "*Do-La*" or "*Sol-Mi*" in the melody. Using a series of rainbow arcs, build to a high note three-quarters of the way through. Use descending half-rainbows to accentuate the high note.

Melancholy outro: Back at Stax, "Dock Of The Bay" gets a cool reception, but Redding insists it will be a hit. Released in January, 1968, it soars to No. 1 and stays at the top of the charts for four weeks. Sadly, he never lives to see his judgment validated. On December 10th, 1967, three days after recording "Dock," Otis Redding's Beechcraft H18 crashes in frozen Lake Monona in Wisconsin, silencing a great songwriting voice forever. ★

DAVID ALZOFON is a former editor for *Guitar Player* magazine and the author of two books, most recently, *Compose Yourself!: Songwriting And Creative Musicianship in Four Easy Lessons*. He teaches guitar in San Diego, California.

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BY GARY TALLEY

GUITAR 101

Head Arrangements

The Box Tops in Memphis, 1967. (left to right) John Evans (bottom left) Danny Smythe (top left) Gary Talley, Alex Chilton, Bill Cunningham.

Growing up Memphis in the '50s and '60s, I couldn't have avoided music, even if I'd wanted to. By the late '60s, it seemed like every kid in Memphis was in a garage band. I joined a teenage band called "The In Crowd" and we played at skating rinks, teen clubs, fraternity parties and small-town concert halls within 100 miles of Memphis.

Most Memphis bands did their first demos at Sonic Studios on Madison Avenue, which was run by legendary rockabilly guitarist Roland Janes. I wrote about our first session there in a previous article. We'd record two songs and lip-synch to them on our local George Klein's "Talent Party." We broke up after a couple of years, and I graduated from Messick High School. I was playing a Fender Esquire, which someone had painted black and added a neck pickup. My amp was a Silvertone with two 12'" speakers.

Later, in the spring of '67, I got a call from John Evans, one of my old "In Crowd" bandmates. He asked if I wanted to play guitar for "The DeVilles," a popular local band that John had recently joined. They'd recently hired a new singer, Alex Chilton, a gruff-voiced 16 year old. I said yes and we promptly rehearsed at Alex's spacious house.

We did quite an eclectic mix of STAX, British Invasion, Motown and pop. But I also had to learn "that song we cut for Roy Mack" (our manager), which turned out to be "The Letter" by Wayne Carson Thompson. They had gone into Chips Moman's American Studios and recorded the song a few weeks before I joined the band. At that time there was no record deal, just a song "in the can." Roy Mack also managed a band called The Gentrys who had a regional hit with "Keep On Dancin'," which was recorded at the same studio.

Every musician is an arranger and producer.

At our first rehearsal, there in Alex's parents' well-lighted living room, they told me how it all went down that day: When they arrived at American at 827 Thomas St. the studio was full of stale food and cigarette butts from the previous night's recording session. The five DeVilles were met by songwriter and fledgling producer Dan Penn. They'd listened to Wayne Carson's reel-to-reel demo and had it down pretty good. Alex had been up late partying the night before and his voice was even huskier than usual, especially after the multiple takes it took to get it just right. Dan, a great R&B singer in his own right, coached Alex on the pronunciation of a few words, notably "aero-plane." The band sang harmonies on it, and string/horn overdubs (arranged by Mike Leech) were done later. Dan decided to add the sound effect of an airplane taking off. A record deal was made soon thereafter with Larry Utall of Bell Records.

"The Letter" went straight to the top of the charts. Richard Malone and Russ Caccamisi had quit the band in the meantime, so now it was Bill Cunningham on bass and me on guitar. We got really busy and changed the group's name to The Box Tops.

In recording with The Box Tops on subsequent records I got to learn from the house rhythm section at American Studios. I got to watch and record with them (The Memphis Boys) in Memphis and later on in Nashville. I never saw a sheet of written music at the three busiest studios in Memphis – American Studios, Stax or Hi (Royal). Everything was head arrangements. The artist or writer would play and sing the song in the studio usually and the band would write number charts right there on the spot. It takes a great ear to do that. Every musician is an arranger and producer, in a way. You agree beforehand who's going to do the fills in each section.

There are some basic guidelines that everybody followed: 1) Play what fits the song (even if it's nothing) 2) Don't "step on" the vocal 3) Less is more and 4) Listening is as important as playing.

I've seen Bobby Emmons sit poised at the keyboard listening to a playback, and when asked to put a few fills in, he listened all the way through and said, "I can't." His ears wouldn't let him clutter things up.

After American, I played on sessions at Hi (Ace Cannon), Stax (song demos for staff writers), Universal (Jerry Butler, Marcia Moore, The Three Degrees), and then got hired by Stan Kessler as staff guitarist at Sounds on Memphis Studios (later to become House of Blues), where I played on sessions by Billy Lee Riley, Dave Moore, The Memphis Horns, and many others.

All of these were "head arrangements" with rhythm sections making up their own parts.

Most of these sessions were done on analog recording equipment, Fender tube amps and assorted guitars. Running your guitar into a Leslie cabinet was a neat trick. Few, if any, effects pedals were used at the time by the Memphis guitar players until the late Skip Pitts used a wah-wah pedal on Isaac Hayes' *Shaft* soundtrack. ★

GARY TALLEY is the original guitarist for Grammy-nominated group The Box Tops. He's toured and recorded with Willie Nelson, Billy Preston, Waylon Jennings and more. His DVD *Guitar Playing for Songwriters* can be purchased at garytalley.com.

BY RAND BISHOP

MAKIN' STUFF UP

The Memphis Blues Again . . . and Again

Chuck Berry's song "Memphis, Tennessee" has been covered by numerous artists.

There's a "New York State Of Mind." We love L.A. "cause the sun is shining all the time." Chicago toddles — whatever that means. "London's Calling" — even though its bridge is falling down. "April in Paris" makes your heart sing — unless, of course, you left your ticker in San Francisco. In Rome, "Three Coins In A Fountain" hope for a blessing. After diggin' those guitar-pickin' "Nashville Cats," don't miss the "Last Train To Clarksville" or you'll never catch the "Chattanooga Choo Choo" and your connection on the "City Of New Orleans." Avoid "El Paso" or you might fall in love with a wicked Mexican girl. "Kansas City," too, has its share. "Cleveland Rocks." Detroit, however, is Rock City. Philadelphia = Freedom. It might be "Tulsa Time" but "By The Time I Get To Phoenix," by way of Galveston, she'll be rising.

Cities, it seems, have always inspired songwriters. Tunes about Little Rock, Rio, St. Louis, Tokyo, Wichita, Bangkok, Tupelo — even fictional map dots like Mayberry — evoke longing, romantic imaginations, and stirrings of nostalgia. Curiously however, the municipality boasting more mentions in more song lyrics than any other on terra firma is a mid-sized, American burg situated on the banks of the Mississippi River. And to prove that audacious claim, the Memphis Rock N Soul Museum compiled a list of more than 1,000 renditions of nearly 800 individual copyrights that refer to its hometown by name.

Certainly, when it comes to being fodder for song, Memphis has a big leg up. I mean, Elvis, right? The provocative, primitive noise blasting out of southwestern Tennessee in the mid '50s turned the entire planet on its ear! To boot, during the following decade, R&B and Gospel birthed a baby there, a world-famous child they christened "Soul." However …

As it turns out, tunesmiths had been putting Memphis to melody long before Sun Studios and Stax Records existed. In 1912, W.C. Handy's "Memphis Blues" became the first blues song ever published and subsequently enjoyed popular interpretations by Duke Ellington, Harry James, and many others. In 1926, Bessie Smith hit with "Jazzbo Brown from Memphis Town." Memphis figures prominently in Jimmie Rodgers' "Blue Yodel #9" (1930) and the Harold Arlen/Johnny Mercer standard "Blues In The Night" (1941). The legendary names who have recorded those two titles would take up this entire page.

So, for more than a century, Memphis has played the leading lady in song — songs about bein' on the way there, rollin' down there, goin' back there, gettin' outta there, bein' 100/30/18 miles from there, or just a mile outta there, a day past there, or spending seven days there. Songs describe Memphis in May, in June, and "in the meantime." Singers wail about taking their last run there, how they should-a been from there, or that you really don't have to go there. They beg to be taken there. Some even feel compelled to admit that they've *never* been there or declare that they ain't goin' there.

Songs cajole us to meet in Memphis. A handful trace the route there — from as close as Montgomery and as far away as Oakland, Galway, even Maui. Somebody with the dubious moniker Elvis Hitler recounts a sojourn "From Berlin To Memphis." Others reveal their next destination — New Orleans or Frisco. Merle Haggard praised Jesus for leading Elvis "From Graceland To The Promised Land." Finding himself "Stuck Inside Of Mobile" with that timeless W.C. Handy tune ringing in his head, Bob Dylan yelped, "Oh, Mama! Can this really be the end?"

The Memphis of song has a beat, a groove, a shake, a shuffle, a stomp, a rag, and a thang. It boasts of an angel, a pig, a pearl, a shroud, and a "Music-Makin' Mama." Confederate Railroad bowed to its queen, while Sponge ogled its drag queens. Memphis is jellyroll, hip shake, rain, heat, midnight, morning, and moon. You can procure a "Memphis Exorcism" or catch the "Memphis Flu."

St. Louis native Chuck Berry (whose career launched out of Chicago) holds the trophy for the most-recorded Memphis song ever. "Memphis, Tennessee" (aka simply "Memphis") counts more than 70 renditions by everyone from Flatt and Scruggs to Morrissey. In addition to the plethora of early rock and roll, blues, R&B, and country performers who have honored Bluff City in song, classic rockers Lynyrd Skynyrd, the Stones, the Allmans, and CCR, singer-songwriters Elton John, Billy Joel, James Taylor, and Joni Mitchell, and alt-rockers White Stripes, Smashing Pumpkins, Talking Heads, and Beck have all contributed to the abundance of Memphis songs, as have hip-hop pioneers Run DMC, Ice Cube, Snoop Dogg, and P Diddy.

Dylan and Haggard both made reference to Memphis in four separate recordings, John Hiatt and Chuck Berry in five, Johnny Cash in six. But the clear champion for Memphis song mentions is homegrown, Oscar-winning, horrorcore rap ensemble Three 6 Mafia — with 22 titles on the list.

Paradoxically, the most famous Memphian of all only uttered his hometown's name on one record — and not in a particularly positive context. Jerry Reed's "Guitar Man" has The King snarling, "I nearly 'bout starved to death in Memphis. I run outta money and luck." True, Elvis finally did run out of luck there. But being broke and missing meals? I'll believe that when pink Cadillacs and fried peanut butter, banana, and bacon sandwiches fly.

A four-decade music biz vet, **RAND BISHOP** (www.randbishop.com) has been a major label recording artist, session singer, A&R exec, platinum producer, and hit publisher. As a songwriter, he counts more than 250 cuts, including country radio's most played song of 2002, "My List," (Toby Keith).

Publicity photo, 1957. Public Domain.

THE PROSODY OF MYSTERY

in "Mystery Train"

BY PAT PATTISON

Sun Studios, where Elvis Presley recorded "Mystery Train" in 1955.

Okay, so who still cares about the young Elvis and his Memphis-based Sun Records recordings? Simple stuff, right? Sure. Scotty Moore and Bill Black are just rock-a-billy hicks thumping away the best they can, them good ol' southern boys.

So why does Elvis' "Mystery Train" still feel like a mystery to be unraveled, fresh on every listening? Have you heard it recently? C'mon, download it and check it out. Then come back.

So? Did you try to count it out? Go back and simply tap out the downbeats. See how you do. I'll wait.

It can be a little confusing. Simplify it a bit. Forget the intro and start counting downbeats one beat before Elvis comes in with "train arrive." It's a pretty brisk tempo.

How many bars do you count before he starts line 2?

Right. Ten bars:

```
1      2      3      4      5
6      7      8      9      10
| //// | //// | //// | //// | ////
| //// | //// | //// | //// | ////
```

Train ar-ri--------------ive
sixteen coaches long

Then another ten bars:

```
1      2      3      4      5
6      7      8      9      10
| //// | //// | //// | //// | ////
| //// | //// | //// | //// | ////
```

Train ar-ri--------------ive
sixteen coaches long

Pretty neat. It throws you off balance, both the ambiguous entry (did you expect it there?) and the unusual ten bar phrase. Maybe, um, mysterious, eh?

But made even more mysterious because of the introduction. Now count it. I'll wait.

Yup, six bars, but with a wrinkle. The first downbeat is pretty foggy, with the guitar starting in the half bar and playing its figure on & 3 &, making it even harder to find the downbeat. So it's an unusual six-bar intro.

Then the vocal starts back-heavy (after the downbeat) in bar seven – the actual first bar of the ten-bar verse. Even more mysterious.

Only when you get to the "chorus," the conclusion of the sequence, do you get to a stable 8-bar section, where he slams the door, letting you know what the mystery train has done to him:

Well that long black train got my baby and gone

Note, however, that the front-heavy (starting on the downbeat) "chorus" picks up in the tenth (weak) bar of the verse "Well that…," making even the stable 8-bar sequence a tad ambiguous. Then the long/gone rhyme puts the finishing touches on the section.

There's prosody galore in this treatment. The verse is unstable and mysterious – even spooky – while the "chorus" leaves no hope for our hero. It's a nifty use of a third level of phrasing.

Either Scotty and crew had no idea what they were doing, or they really did. I'd opt for the latter explanation. Even if they didn't think of it in terms of prosody, you can. And you can use it in your songwriting.

Go get 'em. ★

Pat Pattison is a professor at Berklee College of Music, where he teaches lyric writing and poetry.

Photo by Kate Cauthen

DREAMING OVER MUDDY WATERS

A native Memphian pays tribute to her hometown's musical heritage.

BY RACHEL BRIGGS

In the far western reach of Tennessee, in the lower corner of the state at the triune of the Arkansas, Mississippi and Tennessee state lines, lies a city that is underestimated, overlooked and generally misunderstood. Its roots crawl out from the waters of the Mississippi River and spread from the Delta and farmlands that surround it into city streets that crack and heave under the weight of buildings and the effects of a perennially oppressive summer sun.

There are no distinct lines as to where Memphis begins and ends. Local music legend Tav Falco, in his expansive tome *Ghosts Behind The Sun*, references William Faulkner in saying that Mississippi is as much a part of the city as Tennessee and Arkansas, as the state "extends from a hotel lobby of Memphis to the Gulf of Mexico." One could say that the music of Memphis and its creators reside both in and beyond the city limits; that the town functions as a fulcrum whose lever swings out in all directions — from Holly Springs to Pine Bluff to Ripley and beyond – and that all the places and people therein give and take from each other, creating a perfect symbiosis that encapsulates what Memphis music truly is.

*****

So how to define the mythos of Memphis? To understand the expression of a place, one must try to understand the source. Memphis is an old Southern river town that has known its share of darkness along the way, from the horrors of the slave trade to the trauma of The Civil War, from yellow fever outbreaks to the struggles of the Civil Rights Movement. It is still a town wrestling with its past wounds, but through those wounds comes art, which in Memphis' case, is music.

Growing up in Memphis, I was nascently aware of the city's rich musical heritage. What I didn't realize was just how strongly the city's sounds rippled into other realms. The iconoclastic Sam Phillips, founder of Sun Studios, felt "the soul of a man" whenever he heard Howlin' Wolf play. Sun artist and rockabilly legend Charlie Feathers said the tunes of venerable Delta bluesman Junior Kimbrough were "the beginning and end of all music." In Memphis, rhythm and blues music has always added soul to rock and roll, an influence rock and roll couldn't shake if it tried.

Tav Falco, in an interview with *The Quietus*, stated, "In Memphis, and anywhere an artist lives, you work with what is at hand, and what was at hand, in Memphis, was music. So these performances I saw, and we'd go out and see, you know, Albert King, Bukka White, Mississippi Fred McDowell, made a large, subliminal and a very intense mark on my consciousness and influence on my perception and thinking."

*****

Growing up, the sounds of Memphis were ubiquitous, and they permeated our lives. As a student in the public school system, a rite of passage involved pacing through Booker T. & the MG's "Green Onions" on the plastic recorders they supplied in music class. One spring, we delivered a school choral performance of Otis Redding's "Sitting On The Dock Of The Bay," with the gentle lyricism of Steve Cropper's guitar parts being replaced by a stage full of kazoos. During an impromptu concert for parents at the end of music camp one summer, we all did the Funky Chicken, led by the late, great Rufus Thomas, who proceeded to dance in the aisles with reckless abandon. (I'll always remember his contagious presence and cartoonish grin). Later, in 6th grade, I got asked to interview Willie Mitchell and Bobby Blue Bland for our little school's newspaper. And back in my neighborhood, on summer bike rides and walks home from school, I would always notice the black-iron fence guarding the entrance to Sam Phillip's house, decked out with with the same crescendoing musical notes that lined the front gates of Graceland just across town.

Every May ended with a sunset symphony on the river, with local legend James Hyter belting encore upon encore of "Ol' Man River." Glimpses into the soul of Memphis would flicker and vanish in the rounds of the chorus as barges and riverboats floated by, and to this day it still serves as the perfect conduit to get closer to the source of what Memphis music springs from.

*****

Memphis lives by its own "Ars Gratia Artis," and in its particular case, "music for music's sake." I hope that always remains, and that the musical soul of Memphis will keep pulsing, like the river its roots spring from. In turn, I'm thankful that water is in my blood, and I always hope to find myself, as Jimmie Rodgers wails in his "Mississsippi River Blues," "… dreaming over muddy waters, flowing through familiar scenes." ★

Rachel Briggs is the former art director at American Songwriter. She now works as a freelance designer and illustrator and can be found at rachelbriggs .com.

Illustration by Rachel Briggs

BY JIM BEVIGLIA

"Thirteen"

By Big Star

Alex Chilton, Jody Stephens, Chris Bell and Andy Hummel of Big Star.

Photo courtesy Magnolia Pictures.

The name of the album was *#1 Record*, which was bitterly ironic, as it ended up selling under 10,000 copies upon its initial release in 1972. The name of the band, Big Star, also proved to be an unfortunate misnomer, because outside of critics and other musicians, they remained virtually anonymous during their brief time together.

Despite all these negatives and contradictions, Big Star included on *#1 Record* one of the best ballads of the rock-and-roll era, the hauntingly yearning "Thirteen." The title comes from the age of the narrator, and the song is one of the most accurate depictions of an era in life when the first pangs of romance arrive to simultaneously enthrall and torture.

On *#1 Record*, their debut album, Big Star wielded an impressive duo of singer-songwriters in the Memphis-raised pair Alex Chilton and Chris Bell. Chilton had already achieved chart success as a teenager with The Box Tops, displaying gritty vocals that were soulful beyond his years on a string of rhythm and blues-influenced singles. But when he joined up with Bell, a proponent of a combination of Byrdsy jangle and Beatles-y catchiness that would come to be known as power pop, Chilton changed his game, as he told Gibson.com in a 2007 interview.

"Well, Chris's band was already in place when I joined," Chilton remembered. "And they weren't very big on R&B, or black music, at all. So I just sort of did what the original concept of their band was. I tried to present things that were compatible with the concept of this group that was already in place. When I say 'they,' I guess I'm really referring to Chris. I just tried to get with Chris's stylistic approach as well as I could."

Bell and Chilton wanted to emulate the Lennon/McCartney formula as much as they could, so they shared credit on many of the songs on *#1 Record* even though there was in fact little writing collaboration between the two. "Thirteen," for example, was entirely Chilton's creation, and he also delivers the aching vocal that vacillates between hope and heartache and that many cover versions have tried to emulate but never quite matched.

"Thirteen" focuses on an age that is somewhat underrepresented in pop and rock music. Many have written songs about childhood, and, since rock and roll was born out of teenage rebellion, high school ages and upward are of course the focus of many a ditty. But Chilton finds that bittersweet spot in between when innocence still lingers but more complicated emotions start to work their way into the picture.

Over tender acoustic guitars, Chilton begins with a question that 13-year-old boys have been asking 13-year-old girls for generations: "Won't you let me walk you home from school?" "Won't you let me meet you at the pool?" he follows, again treading lightly so as not to scare her away. He eventually suggests a date at the dance on Friday; "And I'll take you," Chilton delicately sings, as if anything more forceful than a gentle plea will destroy his chances.

In the second verse, the narrator for the first time reveals an obstacle blocking the path to this girl for whom he is clearly falling hard, his modest queries notwithstanding. "Won't you tell your Dad get off my back?" he asks her. His response to the doubting father is brilliant: "Tell him what we said about 'Paint It Black.'" By drawing a parallel between his own musical tastes and that of the father, he's hoping to show that he's not just some punk kid with bad intentions, although doing that by name-dropping a song by The Rolling Stones, one of the most lascivious bands, might be defeating the purpose. And his next exhortation ("Come inside now, it's okay/ And I'll shake you") shows that his intentions aren't all that pure after all, the sexual hinting a gutty and honest move by Chilton.

The final verse finds him struggling as she remains both rigidly unknowable ("Won't you tell me what you're thinking of?") and frustratingly proper ("Would you be an outlaw for my love?") His concluding lines redeem him in terms of his integrity and honor, even as they suggest that he's losing his opportunity with her in the process: "If it's no then I can go/ I won't make you." The final "Ooo-hoo" that Chilton utters is a real killer, tinged as it is with the sting of implied refusal.

As mentioned above, you can find some fine cover versions of this classic, with brilliant and diverse artists like Garbage, Wilco, and Elliott Smith taking their turns, among many others. But they'd likely all agree they were playing for second behind Chilton's one-of-a-kind performance. Big Star never lived up to their name and *#1 Record* didn't come close to achieving the potential of its title. Yet "Thirteen" is as good as it gets for those looking to relive that moment when life is still rife with possibilities but love seems stubbornly impossible. ★

BY MARISSA MOSS

Guy Clark

1941-2016

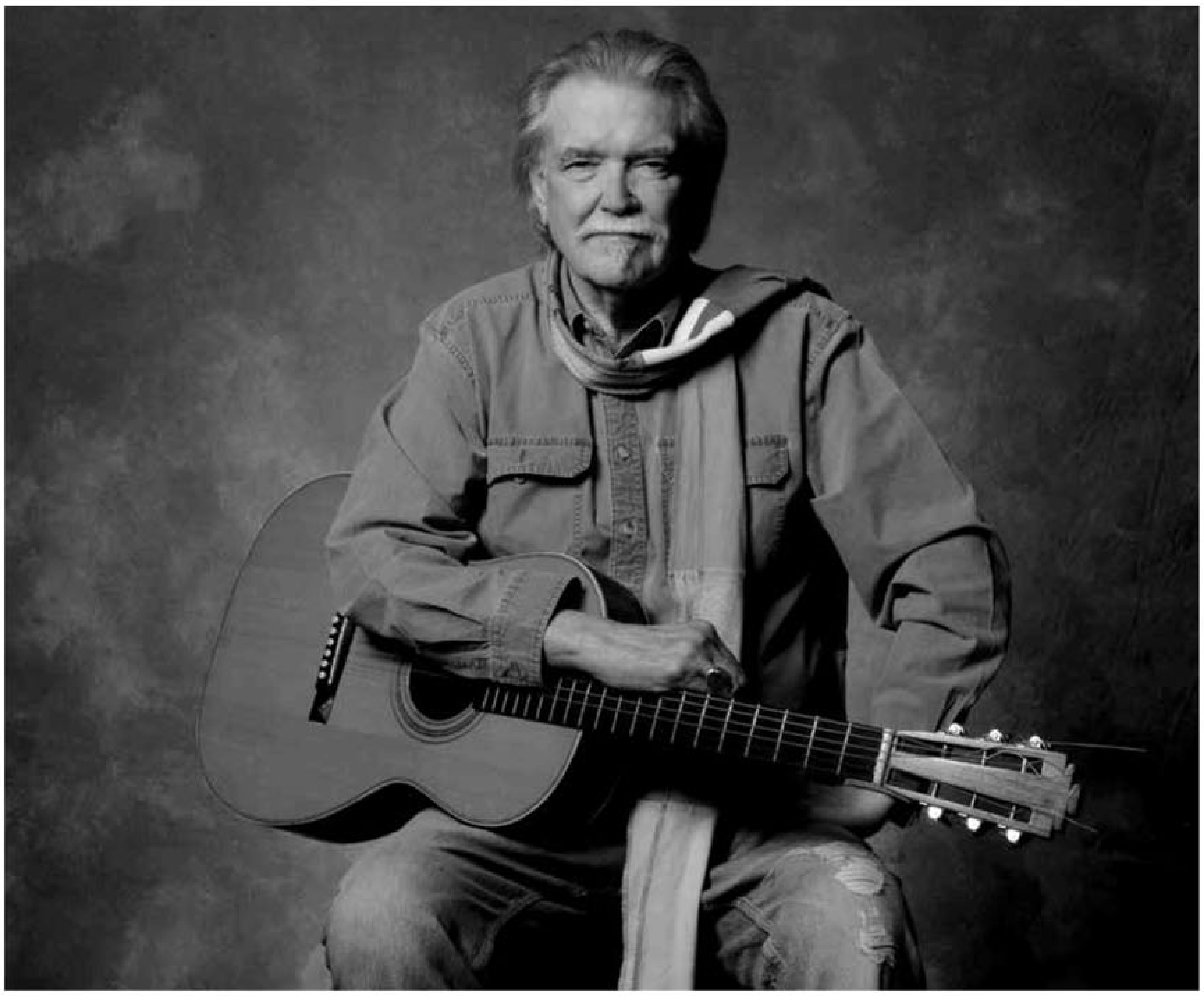


Photo by Jim McGuire

In 2013, Guy Clark invited me over to his workshop for an interview, the results of which would become *American Songwriter*'s July/August cover story. His new album at the time, *My Favorite Picture Of You* (which would be his last) was on the verge of release, and though he was suffering from health problems and using a cane, we still sat for hours in his basement as he puffed cigarette after cigarette and told stories about Townes Van Zandt's funeral, failed writing sessions with John Prine and his love for *The Big Bang Theory*. Though much of our conversation made it into the feature, there were many choice bits of Clarkian wisdom that didn't – including the advice he gave me for my then-unborn son that's truly relevant to us all.

On writing everything down

You can have a little flash of brilliance or inspiration here or there, but you have to do the work. One of the things I learned is you have to write it all down, in case you do have one of those little flashes while washing dishes. Because it will be gone. I used to write in these bound books, because I thought that would solve all my problems. However, it didn't, and now I just write on [graph] paper simply so I can shuffle stuff around if I find something that goes with something else.

On modern country

Country music today, there are some really good songs out there. And there is a lot of bullshit, but that is true with everything. It's a business. They are trying to make money and the guys that are running the show, they simply look at what the charts say – "that was a big seller, let's make one that sounds just like that one." That's just human nature. People say, "Oh, the '80s were just so cool." Yeah right. Chet Atkins looked back on that and said, "God I wish I hadn't done that. Boy, I sure ruined country music." I have no idea if I would be able to stick it out today, because I am not a great guitar player, never was. But I write pretty good songs – they're just not hit songs. Not trucks and beer, beer and trucks.

On searching for truth in song

That's just something I have always tried to do from the very beginning — the truth is always stranger than fiction, that's just a given. And trying to write that into a song doesn't always work, but I had the best luck with that.

On co-writing with younger artists

I learn a lot from young songwriters. There is a plethora of really bright, good songwriters out there. And there's a lot of bullshit, too, but that was always the case. Nothing has changed.

On the line between songs and poetry

I think you can kind of have it both ways, however there is a certain discipline you have to employ to make it a song. You don't always have to have a chorus, but sometimes it helps, as it does in poetry. But I think you can write good poetry and have it be a song. I've always tried to have the songs read like poetry — but a lot of times I like it to read like a sentence.

On how his work has impacted others

I did my best, whatever that's worth. It's nice to have people be touched by your work or influenced, I guess. I always have people coming up to me and saying, "Hey, you saved my life, you touched my life. You're the only thing that got me through." And now it's, "My grandfather, he sat me down to listen to your records." Wow. Well, sorry!

On how drugs can help creativity

It can kind of free you, in a way, from how you always think, or think straight, about getting the rent or the car fixed. And you just feel better and sometimes you don't – you can overdo it to where you feel like shit, and that's the wrong way to use them. They are tools. I see a lot of people who say, "Oh no, I don't do drugs, I don't do that." Well, suit yourself. I don't have anything against doing drugs and drinking and writing, I got a lot of songs I wrote under the influence of something. And I got a lot of songs I did really straight. It's what you do with it.

On if he likes rock music

I like the Rolling Stones, but I don't know what's "rock" anymore. I think Chuck Berry might be it. He's a brilliant lyricist.

On his signature denim-on-denim

It just evolved. That's just what I wore. Stuff I like. Stuff that felt good.

On Steve Earle

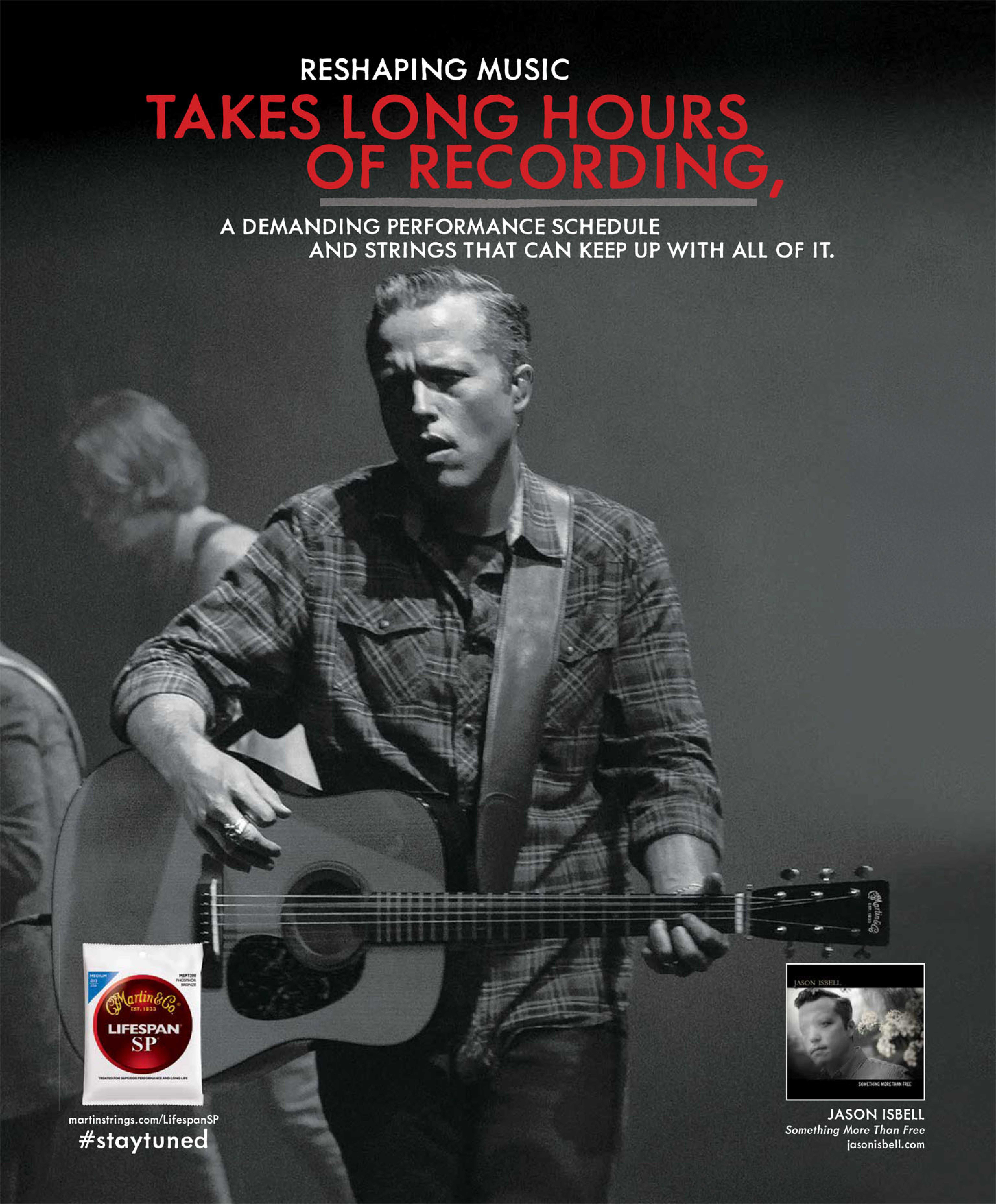
He's a talker. I liked him better when he was a drinker. But Steve has educated himself very well. He can converse on just about anything.

On the Internet

Shit. Don't even say the word Internet! I'm old school.

On what advice he would give to my unborn child

Make him read Dylan Thomas and listen to Woody Guthrie. And don't die wishing you'd done something else. ★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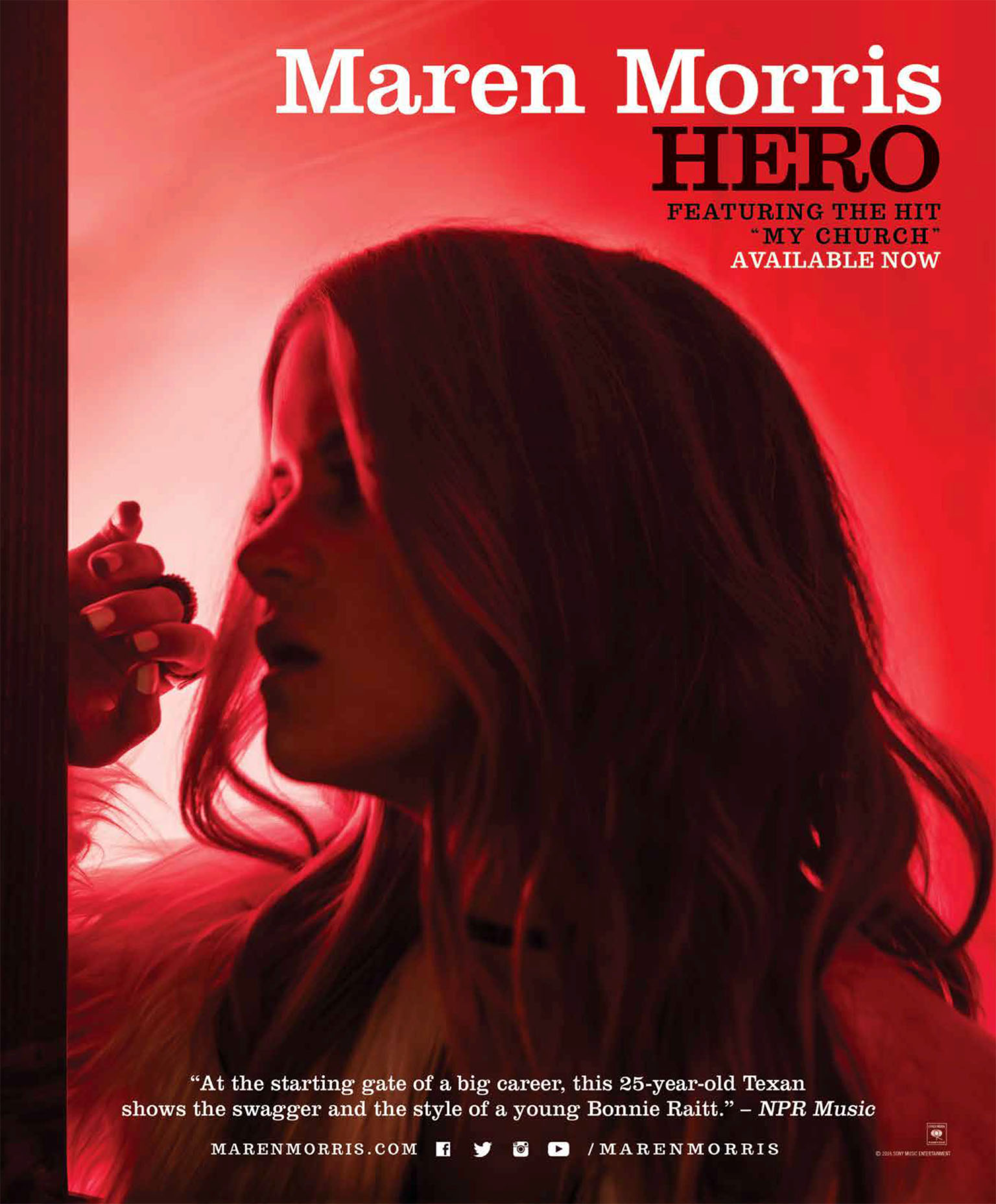
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